

HOW OTHELLO BECAME BLACK: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF SHAKESPEARE'S  
MOOR IN NEW YORK CITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

The relationship between William Shakespeare's black Othello and white Desdemona has held a particular hold on the American imagination for two-hundred and fifty years. During its history on the New York stage, Shakespeare's *Othello* has been a battleground for race relations and identities, which continue to be fought and negotiated today. In this study, I ask the following research question: How did productions, criticism, and popular understandings of Shakespeare's *Othello* reflect and influence the formation of racial identities in New York City from its first performance in 1751 to the performance of Paul Robeson in 1944? The looks at the ways a community used Shakespearean performance and meanings to define the boundaries and qualities of racial identities. By combining the concept of *Whiteness as Property* developed by legal race historian Cheryl Harris and the cultural history of the New York theatre developed by Bruce McConachie in *Melodramatic Formations*, I link larger trends in the history of race with trends in the cultural history of the theatre. I argue that *Othello* becomes the property of white Americans in the nineteenth century, conferring them financial and cultural benefits. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black Americans claim *Othello* as their property, thus challenging exclusive white ownership of the legitimate American theatre.

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: THE WHITE-MADE WHITE OTHELLO.....	19
CHAPTER 2: THE WHITE-MADE BLACK OTHELLO.....	69
CHAPTER 3: THE BLACK-MADE BLACK OTHELLO.....	109
CHAPTER 4: SELLING THE WHITE OTHELLO.....	148
CHAPTER 5: PAUL ROBESON: PROGRESS AND REINVENTED WHITENESS.....	177
EPILOGUE.....	224
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	228

## INTRODUCTION

Abigail Adams was disgusted by Shakespeare's *Othello*. After seeing it played for the first time, she wrote, "I could not separate the African color from the man, nor prevent that disgust and horror which filled my mind every time I saw him touch the gentle Desdemona."<sup>1</sup> A generation later, her son John Quincy would famously agree with his mother: "upon the stage, (Desdemona's) fondling with Othello is disgusting...the great moral lesson of the tragedy of 'Othello' is, that black and white blood cannot be intermingled in marriage without a gross outrage upon the law of Nature."<sup>2</sup> The embodiment of an interracial relationship in *Othello* provoked racist responses among some early-American theatergoers, but the Adams' comments also raise an important question: Hasn't Othello always been black? Starting with Richard Burbage in seventeenth century, hundreds of actors played Othello in "blackface." Many argue that Shakespeare's text supports Othello's blackness. In both the 1622 quarto and 1623 folio, Othello is called a "black ram" with "sooty" bosom; Othello himself declares "I am black." Today playing Othello can be a defining moment in a black actor's career. Paul Robeson, Earle Hyman, James Earl Jones, and Laurence Fishburne are remembered for their ability to play Shakespeare's most highly regarded black character. Each summer, Shakespeare festivals across America produce *Othello* when they have a black actor they think capable of the role. Othello's blackness is popularly assumed off the stage, as well. The press has referred to both Clarence Thomas and O.J. Simpson as acting like Othello. Critics, actors, and journalists have assumed the Moor's blackness for hundreds of years.

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<sup>1</sup> Abigail Adams. *Letters of Mrs. Adams, The Wife of John Adams, Fourth Edition* (Boston: Wilkins, Carter, and Company, 1848), 276.

<sup>2</sup> John Quincy Adams. *New England Magazine* (9), (1835) in *Americans on Shakespeare: 1776-1914*, Peter Rawlings, editor (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), 65.

Others forcefully argue that Othello has always been, and will always be, white.<sup>3</sup> For most of its history, Othello was played by a white man. William Shakespeare, the creator of Othello's story, was what we now call "white." Perhaps *Othello* was never about a real black man, but about a white man's idea of blackness. As cultural historian and *Othello* expert Virginia Mason Vaughan warns, this is a problem. "When we remember that Othello is a wife murderer," she writes, "there is a danger in making the Moor stand for all black males."<sup>4</sup> Does the play reinforce the idea that black people are violent and sexually unrestrained? To what extent does a contemporary production need to be aware of the play's white authorship? Is *Othello* nothing more than a culturally authorized minstrel show? Is it possible that Othello has never been and will never be truly black?

Our individual answers to these questions determine how or even if we think the play should be performed today. Vaughan concluded, as many have, that black men should not perform the role, arguing that "if the play is performed as written, I am not sure Othello's part should be portrayed by a black actor at all, and it should not be seen as the pinnacle of a black actor's career, as it so often is."<sup>5</sup> Vaughan's analysis rightly challenges artists and scholars who work on the play; and it does not end the discussion of the play's importance. Throughout its history in New York, *Othello* has been about more than black pathology, in part because Othello's story is not just about violence, jealousy and sex. Unlike other early modern stage Moors that were indeed the personification of evil, Othello is a "noble" Moor from a "royal" line. *Othello* is about violence and sexual jealousy, but it is also about a dignified hero. This

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, see Dymphna Callagan's essay "Othello was a White Man": Properties of Race on Shakespeare's Stage," in *Alternative Shakespeares* 2, ed. Terence Hawkes (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Mason Vaughan. *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 104

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 106.

mattered to black New Yorkers, many of whom saw the play as a reflection of their experiences in America.

In the nineteenth century, New Yorkers did not agree on what performances of *Othello* meant or even if they were any good. However, many blacks and whites did share a belief that *Othello* and the genius who created the play were important parts of who they were. Indeed, Elise Marks has written that one constant in *Othello*'s performance history is that it has inspired deep passion and emotional connection among both audiences and theatre artists.<sup>6</sup> Yet, because Shakespeare was so wildly popular, *Othello* was not confined to the stage. New Yorkers also used *Othello*'s meanings to describe contentious political and social changes in their city, especially when it came to race. Actors and audiences, abolitionists and Jacksonians, and blacks and whites fought over racial identities through *Othello*'s story. As Abigail and John Quincy Adams' comments on the play reveal, the fight got ugly.

#### Argument and Guiding Questions

We cannot know the racial messages Shakespeare "meant" to communicate through *Othello*. Shakespeare is dead, and he never offered detailed notes about *Othello*'s "true" race. The work of W.B. Worthen, Leah Marcus, and Steven Orgel has effectively challenged the idea that we can arrive at the truth of an "authentic" Shakespeare who authorizes our choices on stage and our literary interpretations. These scholars have detailed the collaborative nature of Elizabethan script-making and the fluidity of racial categories in the English Renaissance. In *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, for instance, Worthen argues that "the conditions of production in the Renaissance playhouse militate against the final ascription of an ideal, coherent, work to a single animating author, and the texts of Shakespeare's plays are the result of

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<sup>6</sup> For her discussion, see Elise Marks "Othello Me:" Racial Drag and the Pleasure of Boundary-Crossing in *Othello*." *Comparative Drama* (Spring 2001; 35), 101.

dialogue and collaboration, of authorial and non-authorial revision and of the demands of theatre.”<sup>7</sup> Despite this, assumptions about the “author” have held power through American history, serving as an authorizing force for theatrical interpretations and cultural ideologies. In New York, Othello’s race was created through a language of Shakespearean correctness that supported white power and privilege. In this study, I therefore examine not *if* Othello was black, but *when* he was black. I detail the contexts in which Othello’s blackness was used by New Yorkers to describe their world. When did Othello’s blackness mark him as a criminal and when was it associated with his nobility? Who had the power to decide? How did whites come to own Othello’s story and how was their authority ultimately challenged?

In answering these questions, I detail the creation of a white Shakespeare in New York. Many scholars have sampled and even condemned the racist comments of Shakespearean actors and scholars in nineteenth century America. By contrast, I investigate the language of their racism to uncover how it supports the ownership of Shakespeare and the meanings of his stories. Not only did people who wrote about Shakespeare express racism, I argue, but the very definition of the “Shakespearean” fueled the advantages of whiteness. By tracking how the language of white identity was built, I hope to uncover how it has been deconstructed, and how it can continue to be challenged in contemporary performances of Shakespeare. One of the primary revisions of this study is to examine mainstream white Shakespeare while asking a seemingly simple question: What did African Americans think of Shakespeare and *Othello*? Black New Yorkers wrote about Othello with frequency, and many came to see themselves in his story. I examine the processes by which black Americans challenged whiteness and asserted their right

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<sup>7</sup> W.B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 8. See also Steven Orgel, *The Authentic Shakespeare and other Problems of the Early Modern Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2002).



to the cultural capital of William Shakespeare; I argue that Othello only became “black” when black Americans started to author his story.

To examine the creation and deconstruction of Shakespearean whiteness in New York, I approach the topic with a broad historical time frame. The guiding question of the study is as follows: How did productions, criticism, and popular understandings of Shakespeare’s *Othello* reflect and influence the formation of racial identities in New York City from its first performance in 1751 to the performance of Paul Robeson in 1944? In answering this question, the dissertation contributes a new narrative to the under-researched history of pre-civil rights era African American theatre. The study looks at the ways a community used Shakespearean performance and meanings to define the boundaries and qualities of racial identities. By combining the concept of *Whiteness as Property* developed by legal race historian Cheryl Harris and the cultural history of the New York theatre developed by Bruce McConachie in *Melodramatic Formations*, I link larger trends in the history of race with trends in the cultural history of the theatre. I argue that *Othello* becomes the property of white Americans in the nineteenth century, conferring them financial and cultural benefits. In the twentieth century, black Americans claim *Othello* as their property, thus challenging exclusive white ownership of the legitimate American theatre.

### Review of Chapters

In the first chapter, “The White-Made White Othello,” I examine the creation of the white Shakespeare in the nineteenth century. I place professional productions of *Othello* in dialogue with literary critics, popular uses of Othello’s story as metaphor, and black Shakespearean production. I argue that on the stage and in the streets of New York during these years *Othello* was transformed. By 1860s, the play had established its own traditions of legitimate and correct Shakespearean performance based in the white body, voice, and mind. His cultural significance also grew; though

Othello was unknown to many in New York in the mid-eighteenth century, his story became part of the fabric of New York life by the 1860s. I also examine white reactions to black Shakespeare at the African Theatre, arguing that the violent responses of white New Yorkers further solidified Shakespeare as the property of self-consciously white Americans.

The second chapter, “The White-Made Black Othello,” covers the same time period, but details the ways that white New Yorkers used popular understandings of Othello’s blackness to debase black Americans in general. *Othello* served seemingly contradictory purposes in white New York. The character was whitened on the legitimate stage and literary criticism while papers such as *The New York Herald* painted him black in the crime reports. At the same time that the professional stage was disconnecting Othello’s blackness from his nobility, the popular press called black men “Othellos” when they committed violence against white women or engaged in interracial relationships. These relationships, called “amalgamation” in pre-Civil War New York, were seen as increasingly problematic as slaves gained freedom and black New Yorkers entered the public sphere in greater numbers. In this chapter, I also analyze the minstrel adaptations of *Othello* that were popular from the late 1830s through the 1860s. These burlesques relied on depictions of Shakespeare’s black character as stupid, lazy, and naturally violent. Popular understandings of the dangers of blackness were reaffirmed through the minstrel Othello.

Chapter three, “The Black-Made Black Othello,” details how African Americans challenged the language and power of white Shakespeare. By examining black New York’s response to Shakespeare from the nineteenth to early twentieth century, I argue that African Americans created a counter-narrative through a history of black achievement. The reported artistic genius of black Americans such as Ira Aldridge became living evidence against the truth of scientific racism. The second half of this chapter uses evidence from African American newspapers such as the *New York*

*Amsterdam News* to argue that increasing numbers of blacks delegitimized white claims to Othello by claiming that Shakespeare authorized black equality. In 1916, for instance, the Lafayette Players of Harlem performed Othello with an all-black cast to commemorate Shakespeare's death. They co-opted Shakespeare's intentions: according to many African Americans, the black Othello was not only just, but more correct.

Chapter four, "Consuming the White Shakespeare," is an examination of how the economic consumption of Shakespeare's plays changed in late nineteenth and early twentieth century New York. Legitimate performances of *Othello* became consumer products sold alongside fine liquor and cigars. In this chapter, I make use of an archive of playbills from the 1860s to the 1940s found at the New York Public Library Performing Arts Library and the Schomburg Library of African American History. These playbills indicate that the audience consuming the *Othello* event had changed. Being present at a performance of *Othello* in the new upper-class New York theatres announced an elite identity. Playbills turned into catalogs of advertisements and etiquette books designed to sell a lifestyle. The new theatre-goers included many women who were target consumers of etiquette and consumer goods. The conservative womanhood being sold was incompatible with any implication of embodied miscegenation. Thus, gender and race were mutually constructed through Othello and Desdemona: in this elite white culture, a performance of a black Othello became even more incomprehensible given the presence of proper white women.

The final chapter, "Paul Robeson's Othello: Progress and Reinvented Whiteness," brings the threads of the argument together in Robeson's New York performance of the play. The 1943-1944 performance of Robeson's Othello at the Shubert Theatre remains the longest running Shakespeare production in Broadway history and an enduring symbol of the early civil rights movement. Indeed, Robeson claimed Shakespeare as his property and consequently changed how Othello was

understood. However, I argue that in light of the history developed in the first four chapters, the traditional narrative of his performance needs to be reconsidered. Contrary to many histories that tell his story as if he alone was responsible for the ways Shakespeare was being used for black civil rights, I argue that he comes from a long black tradition of resistance to white ideas of proper Shakespeare. Further, I argue that the performance was also successful because Robeson's novelty was sold to white New Yorkers who consumed his image as an indication of their own progressive identity. In the playbill, the white director Margaret Webster discussed the correctness and justice of a black Othello, but also affirmed Othello's and Robeson's "natural simplicity." Thus the event was both an indication of black civil rights and a continuation of a romantic racialism that essentialized inherent qualities of black Americans. Robeson advanced discussions of black equality in America. And whiteness continued in the American theatre.

### Justification

While the examination of *Othello* and race is not new, this study differs in its focus and scope. For centuries, scholars have debated whether the character of Othello is a "negro," an African noble, a tawny Arab, or even a white man. By focusing on the construction of race in the English Renaissance, Shakespeare's thematic purposes, and the function of Othello's racial "otherness" in the play script, scholars have made authoritative conclusions about authorial intention and the correct interpretations of the Moor. By contrast, this study is not focused on Othello's true race, but on what was true about race for Othello's audiences through American history. It is not a study of *Othello* itself, but its use by a culture. As Ben Okri has stated, "if it did not begin as a play about race, then its history has made it one."<sup>8</sup> This study is about the

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Ania Loomba, "Sexuality and Racial Difference" in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Othello*, Anthony Barthelemy editor (New York: Macmillan 1994), 183.

audience and theatre practitioners in New York who integrated the play's meanings into their daily lives.

This study also revises and expands the existing theatrical histories that deal with the topic of Othello's race in America. Many histories are snapshots of important moments in American history when performances of *Othello* were particularly racially charged. In looking at *Othello*'s adaptations in antebellum minstrelsy or Paul Robeson's performance on Broadway, these studies offer important insights into how cultures were reflected and influenced by the play's performance. The limited historical framework, however, does not trace these changes through time. Other histories, such as Tilden Edelstein's 1982 "Othello in America: The Drama of Racial Intermarriage" examine the historical change, but do so in an article-length studies. While broad changes are identified, important nuances are not developed. Further, many of these studies do not trace the play's history in the same geographic location. This study will reexamine some of the conclusions of these studies by tracing two-hundred years of history and examining the play's unique meanings in New York culture.

While I investigate dozens of stage productions, it is not the goal of this study to write a comprehensive stage history. Several books effectively outline *Othello*'s stage history, and though none is exhaustive, taken together, they are fairly comprehensive. The most insightful of these studies, include the following: Julie Hankey's 2005 *Shakespeare in Production: Othello*, Gino Matteo's 1974 *Shakespeare's Othello: The Study and The Stage 1604-1904*, Lois Potter's 2002 *Shakespeare in Performance: Othello*, George Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage*, and Marvin Rosenberg's 1971 *The Masks of Othello*. This study is about the relationship of art to social change, specifically with regard to race.

This study is necessary because of the accepted myths that exist about *Othello*'s theatrical history. In his chapter, "Actors and Acting" in the 2001 *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, noted historian Daniel Watermeier states that Paul Robeson was "the first African American to play Othello in America with a white supporting cast."<sup>9</sup> This is not true. While Robeson's performance was significant, Wayland Rudd played the role in 1930 in Philadelphia with a white cast, a fact that Errol Hill noted in 1978 in his important book on black Shakespeareans, *Shakespeare in Sable*.

The other myth that exists in theatre histories is the idea that racial progress in productions of *Othello* was linear and inevitable. Robeson's performance is often written about as an indication that America was finally ready for a black Othello. Yet the 1943 performance was four years before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier, and less than a decade after Robeson's co-star in *The Emperor Jones* was told by film censor Will Hayes to blacken her skin so audiences would not perceive the relationship as interracial. Far from being inevitable, the path leading up to Robeson's performance was highly contested by those who wanted to hold on to an idea of blackness that perpetuated their power.

### Significance

This study contributes to a larger understanding of how race has functioned on the stage through American history. Recent theorists of race have argued that the constructed nature of race requires that it be understood in its historical and social context. The following history of *Othello* attempts to complicate reductive narratives that see racialized productions as either black progress or white cultural dominance. As the study reveals, *Othello* is a unique topic for racial negotiations, none of which is easily reduced.

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Watermeier, "Actors and Acting," *The Cambridge History of American Theatre* (Cambridge: 2001),1.

This study also contributes to the growing dialogue about how theatre in general, and Shakespeare in particular, is authorized by its creators and critics to justify cultural ideologies. By examining how American practitioners have historically used Shakespeare to authorize theatrical performance and the beliefs that the performances articulate, I hope to uncover the mechanisms by which white power was created and dismantled. In 1998, W.B. Worthen challenged contemporary theatre directors, actors, and critics to abandon false claims to Shakespearean authority and authenticity in his book, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*. By examining how this authority has functioned historically, I hope to give contemporary authorizations a context that can inform performance.

### Methodology

The study is a chronological cultural history with an interdisciplinary approach. The core of this study is to examine performance histories, reviews, playbills, and popular understandings of *Othello* in the New York media to determine how they reflected and influenced racial definitions in the United States. To develop the theatrical history, I make use of documents in popular criticism found in the *New York Herald*, *Poet Lore*, *The New York Times*, *Harper's Weekly* and several others. The black newspapers *The New York Amsterdam News*, *The New York Age*, Frederick Douglass's *The North Star*, the *Journal of Negro History*, and the NAACP journal *The Crisis* are important primary source additions to the study because they contrast the mainstream white media by revealing the self-definition of black practitioners and critics. The sources I use are New York periodicals, books published or distributed in New York, or national newspapers sold in New York. I examine racial ideologies in famous *Othello* productions such as Edwin Forrest and Tommaso Salvini and lesser-known African-American *Othellos* such as James Hewlett.

In this study, I argue that the history of *Othello* tells a history of race in New York. While *Othello*'s race was being contested in the theatre, prominent thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois were fighting for a particular kind of racial progress. The connections between theatre and this larger cultural movement were often direct. In fact, Du Bois wrote an article on black artists in which he claims that Shakespeare intended *Othello* to be played by a black man. The contrasting visions of what *Othello* meant are reflected and reinforced by larger racial conflicts within racial communities.

While this blending of cultural and theatrical histories of *Othello* in New York is unique, there have been many effective studies in a range of fields whose methodological approaches I emulate. In theatre, Virginia Mason Vaughn traces the history of *Othello* in her 1994 book *Othello: a Contextual History*. She primarily examines the play on the English stage and sees it as a reflection of the context in which it was produced. Bruce McConachie's 1992 work on nineteenth-century American theatre *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* provides a writing and research model for focusing on audience in theatre history; McConachie's brilliant explanations of how the audience changed in the nineteenth century are reinforced by the story of *Othello* on the New York stage. Gary Taylor's work on whiteness in literature, *Buying Whiteness: Race, Culture and Identity from Columbus to Hip-Hop*, provides a guide to how the language of race is created over time. Though the timeframe of his study is earlier, Taylor's tracing of the birth of "white" identity provides essential context. An aspect of the thesis of this study is that *Othello* became black because practitioners and critics claimed Shakespearean authority in their interpretations. To develop this thesis, I look to several models in Shakespeare studies. Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow* examines the changes in how Shakespeare as an author and institution functioned in American culture, and provides a model



for placing interpretations in a context of historical Shakespeare. Worthen's work on the authorization of Shakespeare in the theatre provided the initial inspiration to examine how the construction of a correct "Shakespearean" has functioned through time to empower white America.

To develop an argument about the formation and continued power of "whiteness," I consulted the work of Cheryl Harris, David Roediger, W.E.B. Du Bois, and George Lipsitz.<sup>10</sup> I examine "whiteness" as the ideology that confers power, privilege, and property to people who are identified as "white." The study of white identity has a long history, initiated with great insight by African Americans such as W.E.B. Du Bois in his work *Black Reconstruction*. Contemporary scholars have continued to examine how white identity was created and how it has maintained a power structure that keeps financial and cultural capital in the hands of white Americans.

### Limitations

This study has a broad chronological scope which considers *Othello* productions and cultural meanings in New York from 1751 to 1944, with a primary focus on the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. This two-hundred year span enables an analysis of several periods of changing racial definitions; it allows an examination of how the language of whiteness is built, challenged, and ultimately re-invented. However, I choose not to engage in a comprehensive

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<sup>10</sup> For critical studies of whiteness, see Gary Taylor, *Buying Whiteness: Race, Culture, and Identity from Columbus to Hip-Hop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Alexander Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (New York: Verso, 1990); Cheryl Harris, "Finding Sojourner's Truth," *Cardozo Law Review* (November 1996); Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (June 1993); George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness Revised Edition* (London: Verso, 2007); David Roediger, editor, *Black on White: Black Writers on what it Means to Be White* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment of Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

history of the last sixty years of *Othello* performance, not because I think it is unworthy of study, but because so many professional productions of *Othello* have dealt with the issue of race since Robeson's performance that a book-length study would be necessary to deal with them sufficiently.

This study is geographically limited to the production and reception of *Othello* in New York. While the South has an interesting relationship to the play, the specific racial constructions of Southern *Othellos* deserve specific study. New York was the center of theatrical activity in America during most of this time period and was particularly important in African American theatre history. New York was the center of minstrelsy, the home of the first black theatre group, black playwright, and the site of Paul Robeson's watershed performance. It was the setting for deadly race riots and a home for black resistance. Most importantly, New York is where *Othello* first became "black" in America.

### Review of the Literature

In an interdisciplinary study such as this, there are a great number of texts in a variety of fields that inform my study. In addition to the texts already mentioned, many others provide contextual depth. Tilden Edelstein's 1982 essay "Othello in America: The Drama of Interracial Marriage" is a direct look at some of the issues raised by the study of race and *Othello*. Edelstein traces the history in broad strokes, examining the initial phases of blackface *Othellos* in early English productions. He marks the shift to the "tawny" *Othello* of Edmund Kean, which defined both English and American racializations of the character for generations. Edelstein successfully argues that for audiences and practitioners, *Othello* became "a forum for their attitudes about miscegenation and racial intermarriage."<sup>11</sup> Edelstein's essay is a useful broad outline; however,

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<sup>11</sup> Tilden Edelstein, "Othello in America," *Interracialism*, Werner Sollors, editor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). 369.

the article-length of the study requires him to omit important primary source documents that present a more complicated picture of race, especially as it developed within the African American community.

Edward Kahn's 2001 dissertation from Tufts University gives a thorough treatment of early American Othellos in the North. The study, *They Saw Othello's Visage With Their Minds: Interpreting Othello in the Antebellum North* is a well-researched study of several racial and gender themes confronting early productions, including definitions of ethnicity, miscegenation, the treatment of Desdemona as a woman, and "the burnt cork Othello" of minstrelsy.<sup>12</sup> His interest is in how white northerners made sense of the play before emancipation, and he consults not only productions, but prominent scholars. Perceiving an absence in the historical record, he develops his thesis by examining newspapers, promptbooks, and the written record of the early scholars. In contrast to Kahn's excellent study, I focus on the language of whiteness, limit the geographical area to the city of New York, expand the field of primary sources, and expand the historical time frame.

Errol Hill's underappreciated *Shakespeare in Sable* is a history of black actors in Shakespeare productions through American history. He traces the early performers, such as James Hewlett, and continues through more recent productions of Joseph Papp. In his discussion of *Othello*, Hill identifies the basic tension of the play: How can a black man be accepted as a noble Shakespearean hero in a culture of racism? However, the scope of Hill's work is quite different than this study. I trace one text through time in New York with a particular attention to racial formations in a community, while Hill focuses more specifically on the history of black performance.

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Kahn, dissertation. *They Saw Othello's Visage with Their Minds: Interpreting Othello in the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company, 2001), 187.

Marvin Rosenberg's 1971 *The Masks of Othello: The Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics* examines both American and English interpretations of *Othello* as aesthetic products. His history goes through the major Othellos, including Edmund Kean, William Macready, Edwin Booth, Edwin Forrest, Tommaso Salvini, Robeson, and many others. By doing a close reading of performance choices, he determines which Othellos were the most successful. His analysis of critical response to Robeson's performance is particularly well-researched and argued. Rosenberg's theatrical and critical approach differs from the historical perspective of this study; Rosenberg assesses not just significance, but quality.

Edward Pechter's *Othello and Interpretive Traditions* offers a useful summary of *Othello*'s performance in history. He argues that when studying *Othello* historically, many interpretive factors come into account, including the play script used, the actors and their training, the performance space, the state of technology in the theatre, and numerous social contexts. However, the main purpose of the book is to privilege certain readings of the play over others, which he does effectively. My study differs in its explicitly historical focus, but benefits from the context and analysis of Pechter's work.

Gino J. Matteo's *Shakespeare's Othello: The Study and the Stage 1604-1904* is a thorough look at the production history of English *Othello*'s. By examining the words of the practitioners and putting them in historical context, Matteo recreates some of the ways that famous artists have interpreted the play. Yet she deals very little with race and her study is more about performance history than socio-cultural history.

Many biographical accounts of significant Othellos are also instructive. Paul Robeson's autobiography *Here I Stand* reveals the thoughts of the artist as he defined his work as political

statement. The following biographies of Robeson are also instructive: *Paul Robeson* by Dorothy Gilliam, *Paul Robeson: Citizen of the World* by Shirley Graham, *Paul Robeson Jr. Speaks to America* by Paul Robeson Jr., *Paul Robeson: Essays on His Life and Legacy* edited by Joseph Dorinson and William Pencak, *Paul Robeson* by Ron Ramdin, and *Paul Robeson: The American Othello* by Edwin P. Hoyt. Mary Malone's *Actor in Exile: The Life of Ira Aldridge* provides relevant biographical background, as does Richard Moody's *Edwin Forrest: First Star of the American Stage*. These biographies provide specific details relevant to production. Many others, listed in the bibliography, are also useful.

Because the body of literary analysis on Shakespeare and race is quite immense, I will mention some of the studies that most directly inform my study. The three books which I have referred to with frequency are, *Othello: Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* by Ania Loomba, Gary Taylor's *Buying Whiteness*, and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Blackness on early English Stages*. Older studies of Shakespeare and race helped provide background information on the topic. These include the following: *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* by Catherine Belsey; "Blacks in the Renaissance Drama and the role of Shakespeare's Othello" by Ruth Cowhig; and "Othello and Colour Prejudice" by G.K. Hunter.

Finally, several texts are essential background to deal with the history of race and racism in America. Winthrop Jordan's foundational work *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* is an excellent social history of how early modern concepts of race defined England and its colonies. Alexander Saxton's *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, Errol Hill's *A History of African-American Theatre*, and *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* edited by Annemarie Bean, James Hatch and Brooks McNamara, provide specific context for different moments in *Othello*'s production history.

In his seminal work *The Black Image in the White Mind*, George Fredrickson writes that there is a difference between the “race prejudice” that existed before the nineteenth-century and the scientific “racism” that developed in the years leading up to the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> In the nineteenth-century, New York was transformed from a society of prejudice to one with a code of racism, defined through science and institutionalized by law. As the features of the New York racial construct grew through the nineteenth century, Othello’s racial meanings in the culture intensified. I use Fredrickson’s understanding of the difference between “racism” and “race prejudice” as I discuss the relationship between Othello and the developing science of race in New York.

In the epilogue of this study, I suggest further avenues for study and examine the play as a living presence in contemporary America. An important question continues to trouble and inspire contemporary artists and scholars: If Othello has indeed become black, then what kind of black person has he become? Peter Sellar’s October 2009 New York production claimed to be a post-racial *Othello* in the “age of Obama.” Toni Morrison is currently writing an adaptation of *Othello* from Desdemona’s perspective. Others refuse to do the play because of its racism, and Sheila Rose Bland has said that the play should be directed “as a comedy, almost as a minstrel show.”<sup>14</sup> The play continues to provoke dialogue while reflecting and influencing the shifting meanings of race in America

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<sup>13</sup> George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (Harper and Row: New York, 1971), xi.

<sup>14</sup> See Sheila Rose Bland, “How I Would Direct Othello,” *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, edited by Mythili Kaul (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1996), 29-44.

## CHAPTER 1: THE WHITE-MADE WHITE OTHELLO

Though some scholars insist on Othello's essential whiteness, others argue that the white race did not even exist in 1604 when Shakespeare wrote the play. Gary Taylor has convincingly demonstrated that Shakespeare himself would not have called himself "white" because the language of white racial identity had not yet been invented in the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In America, whiteness did not find its full expression until the mid-nineteenth century when scientific race thinking codified and institutionalized racial difference. Whiteness has not always existed, but was made through language, laws, and institutions that conferred power and privilege in a specific historical time and place. This chapter is an examination of the early methods used by New Yorkers to associate Othello's story with an ideology of whiteness from its first performance in 1751 through the nineteenth century.

Indeed, two major trends in New York popular culture converged in the legitimate performances of *Othello* in the early nineteenth century. As white identity was being invented and then clarified, Shakespeare was becoming more popular. Shakespeare was constructed as the "universal" playwright whose plays illustrated general truths of human nature at the same time that the nature of humanity was differentiated into increasingly hardened racial categories. Shakespeare thus gained his status in America through the same language that gave whites status. To argue, as Lawrence Levine does, that Shakespeare "was common property" in the early nineteenth century is to erase the experience of African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that the white Othello was built with several complementary discourses and theatrical practices. In the popular press, critics evaluated legitimate performances of Othello in comparison, writing narratives of Othello's stage history that made

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Taylor, *Buying Whiteness: Race, Culture, and Identity from Columbus to Hip-Hop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). It can therefore be argued that to call Shakespeare a "white" man is anachronistic.

<sup>2</sup> Levine, 42.

stars of actors such as Edmund Kean and Edwin Forrest.<sup>3</sup> In this white history, black association with the bard became abnormal, humorous, and non-Shakespearean. In addition, critics used an understanding of Shakespearean correctness to authorize their critiques of performance and ultimately their views on race. Performances were celebrated for their ability to faithfully follow what Shakespeare had intended as a proper realization of his plays. This “correct” Shakespeare became a white Shakespeare through language that insisted that Shakespeare would not have created a black hero and that proper Shakespearean speech was antithetical to blackness. On stage, Edmund Kean developed a new theatrical norm of lightened stage makeup that disconnected Othello from African Americans. While the makeup did not always make Othello explicitly “white,” it served to heighten the distance between Shakespeare and black New York and played a role in reconciling white supremacist ideology with a belief in Shakespeare’s genius. Finally, the white Othello was forged in violent acts. Black New Yorkers were not only excluded from Shakespeare’s universality, but also forcibly prevented from presenting his works and using his words. These processes occurred alongside and often through a new racialized thinking in New York that formalized meanings of race. Whiteness became embedded in the very definition of the “Shakespearean.”

The developments had real life consequences for Black New Yorkers. The significant financial and cultural capital of William Shakespeare became the property of whites. In her landmark essay, “Whiteness as Property,” legal historian Cheryl Harris argues that the mere fact of being white in America afforded material benefits that created an unequal economic

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<sup>3</sup> I often refer to the “legitimate” theatre throughout this study. The word “legitimate” was one used by New York critics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century to distinguish professional productions from amateur theatre, and in many cases from ethnic or African American theatre. I employ the word “legitimate” not as a personal judgment of a production’s value, but because it is what white New Yorkers called professional theatrical work. See Levine, 30-31 for a discussion of the “legitimate” theatre in nineteenth century Shakespearean production.



development along racial lines.<sup>4</sup> Being white was one form of property, functioning as a source of wealth and status. She writes:

My grandmother's story illustrates the valorization of whiteness as treasured property in a society structured on racial caste. In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect and that those who passed sought to attain...whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated and protected by the law.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that Shakespeare performance was one of the "valuable assets" of whiteness; being white was the only way one could produce Shakespeare. The white claim to *Othello* and Shakespeare thus afforded white Americans both cultural superiority and actual financial benefits.

#### *Othello* on the Early New York Stage

The play's New York life did not begin with racial controversy. In fact, early reviews and advertisements in the New York newspapers reveal that many eighteenth-century New Yorkers did not know what the play was about. *The New York Gazette* advertised the first American performance of *Othello* on December 23, 1751 at Robert Upton's Nassau Street Theatre: "By his Excellency's Permission...will be presented by a new Company of Comedians, a Tragedy, Call'd Othello, Moor of Venice; to which will be added, a Dramatick Entertainmente, wrote by the celebrated Mr. Garriock...Boxes 5s. Pitt, 4s. Gallery, 2s."<sup>6</sup> Later advertisements

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<sup>4</sup> Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (June 1993).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1713.

<sup>6</sup> Advertisement, *New York Gazette*, December 23, 1751. The original capitalization and spellings are maintained in this quotation. For a description of this space and the theater at John Street, see A.M. Nagler, *A Source Book in Theatrical History: Twenty-five centuries of stage history in more than 300 basic documents and other primary material* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1952), 509-518.

from the eighteenth century would change the indefinite language from “a tragedy call’d *Othello*,” to the more definite phrase “the tragedy of *Othello*,” but Upton did not assume familiarity. As late as February 6, 1793 *The Daily Advertiser* referred to “a” tragedy of *Othello*.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the advertisements of the early nineteenth century that would highlight star Shakespeareans, these ads made no mention of the man playing *Othello*. A reviewer of *Othello* in *The Time Piece* wrote in November of 1797 that not only was he unfamiliar with the play, but that “last evening was the first time I ever visited a theatre for the representation of plays.”<sup>8</sup>

These early performances of *Othello* reflected the conditions of eighteenth century American play-going. *Othello* was not advertised as an entertainment end in itself, but as a performance in service of social uplift. The play was valuable to the extent that it could teach about jealousy or provide money for philanthropic purposes. In 1762, for instance, *The New York Mercury* advertised an *Othello* that was to be performed “for the benefit of such poor families as are not provided for by the public.”<sup>9</sup> The actors themselves could be the ones in need of assistance; one performance of *Othello* at the John Street Theatre in 1769 was done “from a benevolent and generous design of encouraging the theatre, and relieving the performers from some embarrassments in which they are involved.”<sup>10</sup> *Othello* had to be justified because the certain values of early New York were largely hostile to theatre. In fact, periodicals such as the *Christian Observer* expressed a common opinion that theatre held little value: “we doubt whether a man powerfully influenced by Christian principles in all his undertakings would think

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<sup>7</sup> Advertisement, *The Daily Advertiser*, February 6, 1793.

<sup>8</sup> J. Alphonso, Letter, *The Time Piece and Literary Companion* 2, Issue 27 (Nov 15, 1797): 2.

<sup>9</sup> Advertisement, *The New York Mercury*, February 1, 1762.

<sup>10</sup> Advertisement, *The New York Journal*, April 6, 1789.

it desirable to contribute...to the dissemination of a taste for the drama.”<sup>11</sup> In this environment, *Othello* was more palatable if it could help realize a social good.

There is little direct testimony from the audiences that attended these performances. The 1751 advertisement reveals that the Nassau seating was segregated with a “box” for the elites, a “pit” for the middle classes, and a “gallery” for the masses, which by the early nineteenth century included some women (often prostitutes) and free African Americans. In his study of nineteenth century melodrama, Bruce McConachie effectively demonstrates that the class divisions served a theatre of paternalism in the American theatre until 1835, which “facilitated the elite’s paternalistic gaze at the players.”<sup>12</sup> For these men, the theatre experience was about the performance of self. “From this superior position easily seen by the rest of the audience,” McConachie argues, “upper class males could ignore, harass, or applaud the performers, actions well within the accepted norms of spectator behavior at the theatre.”<sup>13</sup> The relationship between the pit, gallery, and box reproduced the larger power structure of the city. Upper class elites sitting in the boxes financed the theatre, controlled its moral messages, justified its social purposes, and made sure that everyone knew it.

At this time, the play, and indeed Shakespeare himself, did not hold the sacredness that they would in later years. One advertisement indicated that there would be “a new set of scenes” and “an Italian song” added to the play.<sup>14</sup> Additional entertainment was common in early productions of *Othello*, but came to be seen as sacrilege in the later part of the nineteenth century when Shakespeare’s plays became the standard of highbrow art. Yet in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Shakespeare’s works were integrated into other popular entertainments.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Christian Observer* 7, Issue 77 (May 1808): 326.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society 1820-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> *New York Journal*, April 6, 1769.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, *Othello*'s significance in New York had changed. *Othello* began to be evaluated and celebrated independent of its moral or cultural function. As *Othello* became more recognizable, the name of the person playing Othello became increasingly important. Famous English-born actors such as James Fennel and Thomas Apthorpe Cooper played Shakespeare's Moor for a generation in New York. Cooper's *Othello* first appeared in the late eighteenth century and was still playing in New York when Edmund Kean arrived in the 1820s. The play became very popular and enjoyed multiple interpretations on professional New York stages within the same year.<sup>15</sup> In 1820, for instance, Cooper and Kean would play Othello at the theatre on Anthony Street within a month of each other.<sup>16</sup>

Many of Cooper's and Fennel's performances occurred at the major legitimate theatre in New York, the Park Theatre, which, like the Nassau Theatre, was divided into a pit, gallery, and box.<sup>17</sup> Through the 1820s, the social event of theatre-going retained its paternalistic influences. Though the Park served a cross-section of New York, elites controlled the production of its plays and a demanded class-stratified theatrical consumption. Advertisements listed the separate prices of the seats, and even the separate "vendor" for the "box" seats where the patricians would enjoy the performance.<sup>18</sup>

Through the performances of lead actors like Fennel and Cooper, *Othello* became a play that inspired strong emotion, passion, and audience identification with the lead character. One of Cooper's reviewers summarized a common audience response. "He has moved our compassion

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<sup>15</sup> Though the aim of this project is not to comprehensively detail and recreate the performances, I have included an appendix of all documented New York performances of Othello through the early twentieth century. The list reveals the play's extraordinary popularity.

<sup>16</sup> Advertisement, *The New York Columbian*, December 1, 1820.

<sup>17</sup> For descriptions of the Park space, see Mary Henderson *The City and the Theatre: the History of New York Playhouses : a 250 Year Journey from Bowling Green to Times*, Revised Edition (New York: Backstage Books, 2004); William Dunlap *History of the American Theatre* (London: R. Bentley, 1833), 343-344. I refer here to the second Park Theater, rebuilt after a fire in 1799.

<sup>18</sup> For example, one performance of Cooper's Iago and Fennel's Othello indicated that "places for the Boxes to be taken at the Office." See *The New York Evening Post*, November 1, 1806.

to tears,” he wrote, “and we have shuddered with horror when he personated revenge. Who among us has not felt the force of virtue when he spoke her precepts? Who has not shrunk with dismay when he exhibited to us the curses of vice?”<sup>19</sup> Another reviewer wrote that “Cooper exhibits, in a masterly manner, the furious passions of hatred, revenge and despair. He at once excites our pity and our horror. We dread and shudder at the consequence.”<sup>20</sup> Seeing *Othello* was a participatory event of empathic response; audiences related to characters that embodied the essence of humanity. Cooper and Fennel further established Shakespeare as a star playwright in New York. In 1799, *The New York Gazette* advertised James Fennel’s performance at the New Park theatre in “the celebrated Tragedy of Othello, Moor of Venice.”<sup>21</sup> *The Evening Post* similarly advertised Thomas Cooper as the actor in “Shakespeare’s celebrated tragedy of Othello, Moore of Venice.”<sup>22</sup> The play was now being “celebrated” instead of justified. New York journalists created Shakespeare as a universal playwright who was realized through star actors.

With this increased popularity came language outlining the boundaries of legitimate Shakespearean interpretation. Though most eighteenth century records of the play were advertisements, some early examples of theatre criticism introduced key evaluative language that would grow throughout the nineteenth century. In 1797, *The Diary* discussed the Othello of James Fennel: “Mr. Fennel performed Othello. If animation without ranting, and correct acting without coldness deserve approbation in proportion to their rareness, the talents of Mr. Fennel are entitled to distinguished notice.”<sup>23</sup> The heightened rhetoric of the review highlights the fact that publications such as *The Diary* served a small, elite segment of the population. The review

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<sup>19</sup> “Communications,” *The Republican Watchtower*, December 9, 1804.

<sup>20</sup> “Theatrics, Critique No. 6,” *The New York Evening Post*, December 21, 1801.

<sup>21</sup> Advertisement, *The New York Gazette*, April 25, 1799.

<sup>22</sup> Advertisement, *The New York Evening Post*, December 17, 1801.

<sup>23</sup> *The Diary*, September 30, 1797.

does not tell us much about what the performance must have felt like to its New York audience, but it introduces an important word in judging Shakespearean acting that came to hold great cultural weight. Fennel's was a "correct" performance.

When performances were perceived as incorrect, reviewers criticized the actors harshly. "Mrs. Hallam" played Desdemona opposite Cooper's Othello and was described in derisive terms in the *New York Evening Post*. "Mrs. Hallam looked very lovely in Desdemona," the reviewer wrote, adding "she is utterly incapable, however, of performing the character. She neither possesses the requisite feeling to conceive, nor power to execute, a part of so much interest and importance."<sup>24</sup> He then attacked her husband, writing that "Mr. Hallam, also, is unequal to the part of Iago."<sup>25</sup> Implied in both of these critiques is the idea that there exists the ideal Shakespearean vision to which actors should aspire. The writer did not detail what this ideal would look like, but it justified the critique nonetheless. In this instance the critique was artistic: the essence of Desdemona and Iago was not realized because of a poor performance. In later years, the assumption of the Shakespearean ideal would more explicitly authorize racial ideologies.

As Shakespeare was transformed from popular playwright to reified icon in the early nineteenth century, his interpreters were also celebrated for their ability to properly realize his genius. By 1805, *The Thespian Mirror* was calling Fennel a "celebrated tragedian" whose "masterpiece is 'Othello, Moor of Venice.'"<sup>26</sup> According to another reviewer in the same publication, Fennel realized the true Shakespearean; Fennel "was the Othello Shakespeare

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<sup>24</sup> "Theatrics, Critique No. 6," *The New York Evening Post*, December 21, 1801.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Some Account of the Life of Mr. Fennel, Celebrated Tragedian," *The Thespian Mirror* 1, Issue 1 (December 29, 1805): 5.

drew.”<sup>27</sup> Another wrote that “nature has done her part to fit him for the personation of Othello...his voice, his looks, his size, and his fine proportion evince it; education and study have completed him, and justly render his Othello unsurpassed.”<sup>28</sup> An actor’s appearance was essential to the construction of the Shakespearean. The correct Shakespeare was realized through Fennel’s body, voice, and studious interpretation.

Other reviewers described Thomas Cooper as the perfect Othello. *The Republican Watch Tower* lauded his natural physical gifts: “nature has given him a noble person, strong and uncommonly graceful; a sweet harmonious voice, and yet very powerful; an eye capable of the most tender or most dreadful expression; and a countenance to cry all the passions from gentle love and pity to the harsh fury of anger in her maddest mood.”<sup>29</sup> The author found fault with one particular line reading, however, remarking “we cannot, however, but question the propriety of his manner...it is that of ruffled passion, but should be, as the author meant, gentle and courteously expressed.”<sup>30</sup> The reviewer authorized his critique with an assumption of what Shakespeare must have “meant.” In the nineteenth century, others would argue that it was Othello’s passion and not his gentleness that made him “Shakespearean.” The “Shakespearean” was not an agreed upon universal principle but a functional construction of a specific moment that lent authority to the words of performance critics.

The New York press made heroes of nineteenth century actors. Cooper was celebrated by *The Lady’s Miscellany*, which described him showing in Othello “some of the most splendid proofs of his genius and powers.”<sup>31</sup> It was a uniquely popular performance, seen in an audience that was “more than usually warm in their expressions of approbation, and his expiring scene

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<sup>27</sup> “Friday Evening,” *The Thespian Mirror* 1, Issue 3 (January 11, 1806): 24.

<sup>28</sup> “New-York,” *The Polyanthos* 1 (January 1, 1806): 140.

<sup>29</sup> “Communications,” *The Republican Watchtower*, December 9, 1804.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> “Remarkable Death” *Ladies’ Miscellany* 3, Issue 18 (December, 29, 1804):102.

was followed by four rounds of applause.” An 1811 review from *The Ladies’ Miscellany* of a later version of Cooper’s performance lauded his mind, body, and spirit, writing “Othello is a character in which Mr. Cooper shines with brilliant luster: his size, appearance, and muscular strength are all favorable to him; and these united to a sound judgment, have rendered his performance of this part superior to any in the world.”<sup>32</sup> As this review reveals, the celebration carried an inherent comparison that aided the creation of a stage history legitimating the star actor. Yet, like many nineteenth century critics, the reviewer offered friendly advice on how to improve the performance, writing that “the line ‘pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war’ we think he (Cooper) pronounced in too high a strain considering that it is the conclusion of the sentence.”<sup>33</sup> Even if journalists praised the overall performance, they knew their Shakespeare and were not afraid to help an actor become more correct.

The dozens of actors who played Othello in the first few decades of nineteenth century New York were often praised or lambasted according to a similar rubric of Shakespearean correctness. Thomas Hamblin played the Moor in 1830, for instance, and the *New York Evening Post* reported that “some passages, especially in the third act, he delivered with great effect.”<sup>34</sup> His wife “performed Desdemona with much tenderness and judgment. Her readings were peculiarly correct.”<sup>35</sup> As Othello gained popularity, reviewers used language of Shakespearean correctness to determine the qualities of effective performance.

By constructing correctness, writers created Shakespeare. Othellos were judged on their “natural attributes,” physical presence, vocal quality and fidelity to their conception of the “Shakespearean.” This normative rubric would continue through the nineteenth century. Though

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<sup>32</sup> “Variety, “*The Ladies’ Miscellany* 13, Issue 6 (June 1, 1811): 92.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *The New York Evening Post*. August 11, 1830.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



it was now largely employed to dissect artistic success, it would soon be enlisted to justify other ideological ends. Indeed, it was a white body, white reading, and a white Shakespeare that were constructed as “correct.”

By the early nineteenth century Shakespeare was important to many New Yorkers, and consequently written interpretations of *Othello* were not trivial affairs. A review in *The New York Evening Post*, for instance, sparked a debate in the newspaper over correct Shakespearean reading and authorized performance choices. “Thespiis” wrote that Cooper fell short in Act III because his anger contradicted the fact that “Othello should be earnest and perplexed exhibiting the first dawnings of suspicion, but without the least mixture of anger in his reply to Iago’s ‘think, my lord.’”<sup>36</sup> He supported his criticism by assuming authorial intent, remarking that his argument “receives strong support from the author’s evident intentions of exhibiting Othello, in the course of this interview, under a great variety of passions.”<sup>37</sup> Thespiis also revealed his familiarity with the literary text, later critiquing Cooper for missing a line. In response to the critiques of Thespiis, audience members wrote letters of disagreement. One response challenged the intellectual analysis by arguing that “I feel the worth of Shakespeare’s plays” and that the understanding of Thespiis was “questionable.”<sup>38</sup> The experience of watching Cooper at the Park was important enough to write letters about. New Yorkers disagreed on the meanings and correctness of performances, but not over whether they mattered.

The play that many New Yorkers did not know in the 1700s was one of its most celebrated by the 1820s. In 1828, *The New York Mirror* proclaimed that *Othello* was the “master-effort of Shakespeare’s genius” and that “it is generally allowed by critics, that of all Shakespeare’s productions, there is none in which that great magician of the soul, has evinced a

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<sup>36</sup> “Theatrics, Critique No. 6,” *The New York Evening Post*, December 21, 1801.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “Mr. Editor,” letter, *The New York Evening Post*, December 24, 1801.

most thorough and minute knowledge of human nature, than in the various characters in Othello.”<sup>39</sup> New Yorkers saw themselves in *Othello*; it was about the meaning of “human nature.”

Cooper and Fennel became popular on the New York stage as Othello in the early nineteenth century, but Englishman Edmund Kean and native-born Edwin Forrest became celebrities in the decades that followed. In 1817, four years before Kean’s first American tour, *The New York Columbian* proclaimed his superior skill, quoting an English paper that reported “Mr. Kean’s Othello was one of the most surprising achievements that genius ever performed.”<sup>40</sup> As Othello, Kean could stand “upon the heart of nature, and control its pulsations.”<sup>41</sup> Shakespeare’s popularity was amplified in the 1820s and 1830s through Kean and Forrest; Cooper may have correctly acted Shakespeare, but Kean embodied his very essence. *The New York Literary Gazette* called Kean’s 1826 Othello “one pure flame of genius throughout.”<sup>42</sup> Another reviewer was so taken with his performance at the Park that he remarked “it is not Kean that we see before us it is Othello the jealous Moor, perplexed in extreme.”<sup>43</sup> Often criticized for his voice, Kean nonetheless impressed this reviewer in the “farewell to the dearest occupation of his warlike life,” which “was uttered in those low tones so peculiar to Kean, than which we have never heard any more impressive, sweet and affecting from the voice of man.” *The New York Mirror* enlisted Lord Byron for support who had “pronounced the third act of Kean’s Othello to be the perfection of tragic acting.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *The New York Mirror*, May 3, 1828.

<sup>40</sup> *The New York Columbian*, September, 17, 1817.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *The New York Literary Gazette*, May 20, 1826.

<sup>43</sup> “The Drama,” *The American Athenaeum* 1, Issue 31(November, 24, 1825): 319.

<sup>44</sup> “The Drama,” *The New York Mirror*, December 3, 1825.

Other New Yorkers hated the idea of Kean. Kean was English and had insulted an audience in Boston by refusing to perform for a thin house. While a certain segment of the population affirmed his genius, another “saluted (him) with a shower of rotten apples.”<sup>45</sup> The American stage was “polluted by Kean,” wrote one writer, and Americans should not “countenance the conduct of which Kean has been guilty.”<sup>46</sup> The New York papers and audience were clearly conflicted about him, as one description of his entrance of Othello reveals: “on the entrance of Kean in the character of Othello, he was greeted with loud applause, mingled with some hisses, and other marks of disapprobation.”<sup>47</sup> Further, Cooper’s polished and dignified Othello was in direct contrast to the romantic passion that Kean brought to the role. Cooper himself criticized Kean’s “snarling, snappish speech and his gusty flights of vehement passion.”<sup>48</sup> These, according to Cooper, “are directly opposed to the physical and intellectual forces of Othello.” Cooper, too, assumed an ideal Othello which Kean failed to realize.

While the conflicting reviews reveal the complicated relationship that New Yorkers had to the Englishman, all agreed on the play’s importance and proper realization. The rubric of correct Shakespearean performance was entrenched in New York reviews. And despite the varied reactions, Kean became a legend in the city, remembered for decades after as the best Othello of the era. For generations, New York columnists, many of whom had never seen Kean’s performance, would evaluate New York Othellos by comparing them to Kean. William Winter later summarized this hero worship, stating “the store of superlatives with which the English language abounds has been well-nigh exhausted” in celebration of Kean’s Othello.<sup>49</sup> Kean

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<sup>45</sup> *New York Spectator*, November 18, 1825.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Carol James Carlisle, *Shakespeare from the Greenroom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 201.

<sup>49</sup> William Winter, *Shakespeare on the Stage* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1911): 250.

became New York Shakespearean lore; he became a part of a stage history against which future interpreters would be judged.

Kean also whitened Othello. At the same time that Kean helped establish Shakespeare's genius in the city, he introduced a stage Othello with intentionally lightened stage makeup to New York. Performance historians have marked Kean's Othello as the one that changed the stage standard from a blackface to a "tawny" lighter-skinned Moor.<sup>50</sup> In her excellent 2001 essay, "Othello/Me," for instance, Elise Marks writes that Laurence Olivier's was one of the first blackface Othellos "since 1814, when Kean established the tradition of playing him as an olive-skinned Moor."<sup>51</sup> Most scholars argue that the change was both practical and ideological. The black makeup was seen to obscure the details of the face; actors hoping to illustrate their talent wanted the audience to see their facial nuances more clearly. But it was also a useful way of distancing the character from blackness. With the developing language of Shakespeare's genius, a parallel racial discourse developed. *Othello* became a site for celebrating white genius and negotiating definitions of race. According to his biographer, Kean considered it a "gross error" to make the noble Othello a black person.<sup>52</sup> Kean's performance laid the groundwork for further efforts to make Othello like white Americans. By determining that Othello was not a dark skinned African white New Yorkers outlined the characteristics of their own identities.

By 1830 *Othello* was already a play defined by its own history. Journalists and critics compared new actors to the great masters who had performed Othello, legitimizing

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<sup>50</sup> For discussion of pre-nineteenth century makeup practices for the black Othello, see: Julie Hankey, editor. *Shakespeare in Production: Othello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Edward Kahn, *They Saw Othello's Visage with Their Minds: Interpreting Othello in the Antebellum North*, dissertation, Tufts University (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company, 2001); Gino J. Matteo, *Shakespeare's Othello: The Study and The Stage 1604-1904* (Austria: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1974). See Kahn, too, for a discussion of *Othello's* relative popularity. Indeed, it was uniquely popular among even Shakespearean plays.

<sup>51</sup> Elise Marks, "Othello/me:" Racial Drag and the Pleasures of Boundary-Crossing with Othello" *Comparative Drama* 35, Issue 1 (Spring 2001): 104.

<sup>52</sup> Carlisle, 190.

interpretations through performance traditions. Forrest was compared to Kean, who was compared to Cooper, who was compared to Macready, who was compared to Forrest. *Othello* signified to audiences in relationship to its own history in New York. *The New York Herald*, for instance, remarked that “Macready could not play Othello to compare with Forrest, nor do we think that Forrest would sustain Iago equal to Macready,” and later mentioned that “the Othello of Mr. Forrest has never been surpassed on the American stage, except by Kean.”<sup>53</sup> *The Saturday Evening Post* said of Forrest’s Othello that they would not be so “unkind” to say “that he equaled Kean,” but “Kean aside, the third act of Othello has never been better performed upon our boards.”<sup>54</sup> Junius Brutus Booth once told his son Edwin that ‘in his opinion no mortal man could equal Kean in the rendering of Othello’s despair and rage; and that above all his not very melodious voice in many passages, notably that ending with ‘farewell, Othello’s occupation’s gone,’ sounded like the moan of the ocean or the sougning of wind through cedars.”<sup>55</sup> To play Othello in New York was to dialogue with a history of performers and performances.

None of this history included African Americans. White New Yorkers authorized the correct “Shakespearean” through the bodies and voices of white actors. On stage, the character went from being a darkened blackface character to a whitened hero. Blacks were denied access to Shakespeare, criticized for their lack of education, and lampooned for their laughable interpretations of incorrect Shakespearean performance.

An argument can be made that these changes in the New York theatre- the performance history of Othello, Shakespeare’s universality, the language of “correctness,” and the rise of the star actor -were not necessarily racialized. Perhaps actors gained success not because of their white identity, but because they were compelling performers. This is, in fact, a common

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<sup>53</sup> *New York Mirror*, May 3, 1828.

<sup>54</sup> *The Saturday Evening Post*, July 8, 1826.

<sup>55</sup> Carlisle, 201.

assumption in theatre scholarship. Most studies of early American Shakespeare do not use race as a lens of interpretation.<sup>56</sup> Because of this, it is important to clarify how white identity was crucial to the meanings of *Othello*.

### The Language of Race in New York

It was in a context of celebrating *Othello*, Shakespeare, and star actors that New Yorkers became increasingly assertive of their own white identity and the possible benefits it could offer. The nature of racial thinking changed in New York during the antebellum years. Alexander Saxton has written that “white racism in the U.S. during the nineteenth century was continually constructed and reconstructed out of particular historical circumstances,” and the circumstances in New York were in flux.<sup>57</sup> Though New York slaves were freed by 1827, discussions about the morality of Southern black servitude intensified.<sup>58</sup> Debates about slavery ripped New York apart, and riots often left black New Yorkers and their sympathizers lying dead on the streets.<sup>59</sup> In scientific pamphlets, journals, and the penny dailies, conservative Democrats attempted to codify New York race thinking into a set of principles that affirmed the inherent inferiority of blackness. George Fredrickson notes that in the 1840s and 1850s an emergent science of race played a major role in the discussion of the morality of slavery.<sup>60</sup> This new race thinking found its way into New York in academic journals, Jacksonian newspapers, and through Dr. John H.

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<sup>56</sup> See for instance, Francis Teague, *Shakespeare on the American Popular Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Charles Shattuck, *Shakespeare on the American Stage, Volumes 1,2* (Washington DC: Folger Books, 1987).

<sup>57</sup> Saxton, 391.

<sup>58</sup> For discussions of the gradual emancipation of New York, see David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The politics of Slavery and Freedom 1777-1827* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Shane White *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City 1770-1810* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991).

<sup>59</sup> See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* for a description of these riots.

<sup>60</sup> Fredrickson, 71. For an alternate view of the way racism developed in this country see the work of Alden T. Vaughan, particularly his *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). The evidence in this study supports the Fredrickson view that perspectives on race were fundamentally changing in these years. The new racial language found in *Othello* reviews and in the popular press indicate that racial categories had indeed hardened according to the strict language of the new racial science.

Van Evrie's *New York Day Book*. In his weekly paper Van Evrie justified the inferiority of blacks to a Northern audience, arguing that the differences in races were "equivalent to these which separate various species of animals...there could never be a negro equaling the standard Caucasian in natural ability."<sup>61</sup> These ideas found a sympathetic audience in pro-slavery and Democrat dominated New York.<sup>62</sup>

The characteristics of white identity in New York were clarified in language that warned of the "amalgamation" of the races. An article called the "Progress of Amalgamation," for instance, offered a warning to its white readers: "The amalgamation of black and white in this country is rapidly on the ascendant. Scarcely a week passes that a black and white sheep are not coupled at the police offices for their disgusting offences in the streets of our city, and little mulatto jokers are dropped about on the steps of the dwelling of our citizens."<sup>63</sup> The heightened rhetoric of amalgamation made New York a dangerous place for African Americans to live in the 1830s. This was evidenced most tragically in the 1834 race riots, which took the lives of black New Yorkers and abolitionists, whose perceived support of amalgamation was a threat to white identity. The white supremacist *Courier and Enquirer* advocated a call to action:

It is time...that these abolitionists and amalgamators should know the ground on which they stand. They are...always clamorous with the police for protection and demand it as a right inherent to their character of American citizens. Now we tell them, that when they openly and publicly promulgate doctrines which outrage public feeling, they have no right to demand protection from the people they thus insult.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Fredrickson, 93, 97.

<sup>62</sup> The mayor of New York in 1861 actually took steps to see if the city could secede from the union. For this story, see Barnett Schecter, *The Devils Own Work*, New York (Walker and Company, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> "City Intelligence," *The New York Herald*, November 1, 1842.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Linda Kerber, "Abolitionists and Amalgamators: The New York City Race Riots of 1834" *New York City History* 48(January 1967): 32.

Some New Yorkers followed this advice. Linda Kerber writes that though the 1834 riot was partially motivated by an anti-foreign reaction to the English-born Bowery Theatre stage manager, Lewis Tappan, the “ugliest violence of the evening was directed not at white friends of the Negro, but at the Negroes themselves.”<sup>65</sup> While abolitionists were harshly criticized for their perceived advocacy of amalgamation, it was a black Episcopal minister’s church that was violently destroyed after he officiated an interracial marriage. Black men and women were targeted throughout the Five Points. Kerber notes that “in a weird parody of the Book of Exodus, the mob demanded that white families illuminate their window so that their race might be identified and their homes passed over; the mob would attack homes with darkened windows only.”<sup>66</sup> The riots of 1863 were even deadlier for African Americans in the city.<sup>67</sup> Many black New Yorkers left during the race riots of 1863 and never returned, fearful that they would be slaughtered in the streets. The black population in New York actually dropped after 1863 and would not significantly rise again until the early twentieth century.

The rest of New York was growing exponentially, and as the population expanded, so did the public’s access to news and theatre.<sup>68</sup> Political ideas and theatrical commentary were democratically distributed through an exploding New York press. While Mordecai Noah’s *National Advocate*, popular in the 1820s, had a subscription base of about 1000, papers like the *New York Herald* reached tens of thousands of New Yorkers, particularly those sympathetic with Jacksonian ideals.<sup>69</sup> Saxton writes that these “penny dailies of the first wave” focused their

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<sup>65</sup> Kerber, 28.

<sup>66</sup> Kerber, 33.

<sup>67</sup> For an engaging narrative account of the race riots in 1863 and the politics that surrounded the event, see Schecter’s *The Devils Own Work*.

<sup>68</sup> According to the U.S. Census, the population in New York was 202,589 in 1830. By 1870, the population had grown to almost a million: 942,292. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab10.txt>.

<sup>69</sup> Saxton, 98.



content on crime and sex.<sup>70</sup> In chapter two, I will detail how *Othello* was specifically employed to define blackness through descriptions of sexual amalgamation and criminality.

Even with heightened attention to amalgamation, Shakespeare's *Othello* remained very popular. In her essay, Linda Kerber falsely assumes that the play was not popular during these years.<sup>71</sup> This is simply not true. In fact, it was one of the more popular plays at the time.<sup>72</sup> Yet Kerber's assumption is in itself revealing. In this environment, *Othello* could not be both popular and about amalgamation. It was not. Because of the lightened makeup and white construction of Shakespeare, many did not see the relationship as interracial.

The "legitimate" Shakespeare became an intentionally white Shakespeare. Shakespeare was depicted as unsuited to blacks because their manner of speech seemed comically incongruous with his genius. Before Shakespeare became highbrow art at the end of the century, black New Yorkers were common visitors at the third tier of the Park Theatre.<sup>73</sup> At one performance, Edmund Kean's *Richard III* was being booed by the elite patricians in the boxes, while being celebrated by the blacks in the balcony. *The New York Spectator* related this story with ridicule:

The most ludicrous part of the affair, was the interest manifested for Kean by the blacks in the upper tier. They relished the sentiment of the play so highly, that they could not contain themselves, and their applause was obstreperous. One of them appeared as a kind of leader. He thrust himself forward with a flag and gave signals when his company was

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<sup>70</sup> Saxton, 100.

<sup>71</sup> In his dissertation, Edward Kahn also notices this mistake.

<sup>72</sup> *Othello* was produced hundreds of times from 1830-1865. Edward Kahn's research uncovered at least 100 productions of the play in the first three decades of the antebellum era with at least twenty-four different actors playing *Othello* (Kahn, 13,14). According to Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage*, from 1834-1843 there were thirty-four different actors playing the role; from 1843-1850, nineteen different men played *Othello*; from 1850-1857, twenty nine men played the Moor; finally, from 1857-1865 at least sixteen different men played *Othello*.

<sup>73</sup> For a comprehensive history of black Shakespeareans, see Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

to cheer and cry bravo Kean. “Oh Massa Kean go on!” “he Debbbleish sight better play den Hulet-“ Turn out de brack rascal.” “cuffee lookee dare, how he rolls his eyes like two eggs in a scap dish.”<sup>74</sup>

The anecdote plays on two prevailing depictions of African Americans at the time: they could not control their passions and were a useful source of humor. By mocking the dialect, the *Spectator* outlined the characteristics of a non-Shakespearean black other which provided the foil to the proper Shakespearean white identity taking shape.

That whiteness was being specifically employed through Shakespeare is indicated by the way that whites reacted to black New Yorkers who claimed a right to perform his works. In 1821, William Brown opened the first ever African American theatre and chose Shakespeare for his first production. He began with *Richard III* and later produced *Othello* and *Julius Caesar* for his African Theatre.<sup>75</sup> When Brown moved the theatre across the street from the Park, it was seen to be a direct challenge to the most prominent playhouse in New York. The economic and cultural threat of the black Shakespeareans to the established New York theatre inspired law enforcement to storm the theatre and jail the black actors.<sup>76</sup> They were released by the Police Magistrate after promising “never to act Shakespeare again.”<sup>77</sup> This was not the only example of whites legally disallowing blacks from using Shakespeare’s words. Another story in *The New York Herald* “City Intelligence” appeared about a “stage struck Negro” quoting Shakespeare in the streets. He was locked up for his public disturbance and the Judge only released him after he

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<sup>74</sup> *New-York Spectator*, November 18, 1825.

<sup>75</sup> Many excellent studies have recently been done about The African Theatre, including Marvin McCallister’s *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentleman of Color* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Shane White’s *Stories of Freedom in Black New York*; and George A. Thompson, *A Documentary History of the African Theatre* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

<sup>76</sup> For a further discussion of how this enforced a sense of whiteness, see Joyce Green Macdonald’s excellent essay, “Acting black: ‘Othello’, ‘Othello’ burlesques, and the performance of blackness,” *Theatre Journal* 46, no. 2 (May 1994).

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 85.

made a promise “not to spout Shakespeare in the streets.”<sup>78</sup> The “Negro” consented, lamenting that “Othello’s occupation’s gone.”<sup>79</sup> A black association with Shakespeare threatened white New Yorkers to the extent that Shakespeare’s whiteness was institutionalized by law. Shakespeare became white through legal efforts to keep his representation in white hands. Because of Shakespeare’s broad-based popularity, this stranglehold provided cultural capital and economic advantage. By defining Shakespeare as only white, white New Yorkers were the exclusive benefactors of the money he generated and the cultural status he ensured.

The white hold on Shakespeare was deepened by comical treatments of black actors performing Shakespeare. The behaviors of blackness were defined in opposition to the “Shakespearean.” Simon Snipe comically narrated an experience at the African Theatre performance of *Othello*.<sup>80</sup> Snipe noted the “variegated audience,” consisting of “white, black, copper-colored and light brown.”<sup>81</sup> He criticized the performance of Othello, presumably played by James Hewlett, remarking “it was really laughable to hear Othello address the bearers of the rusty blade thus: “keep us your bright swords, for the dew will rust em.”<sup>82</sup> The curtain was “like floor cloth,” and Rodorigo’s “whole dress resembled that of a patent-sweeps.”<sup>83</sup> They did not make it through the play in part because “Desdemona had not studied her part thoroughly.” This reaction mirrored previous criticism of Hewlett’s Richard III, in which he was described as “a little dapper wooly-headed waiter at the City-Hotel” who spoke in dialect and incorrect Shakespeare: “Now is de vinter of our discontent made glorus summer by de son of New-

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<sup>78</sup> “City Intelligence,” *The New York Herald*, August 9, 1841.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Snipe’s observations are intentionally satirical, and while they are not reliable evidence of what occurred, they do communicate the racial understandings of Snipe and the white readers for whom he wrote.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 114.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

York.”<sup>84</sup> The language employed mirrors the tropes used to judge legitimate Othellos. A well-acted Othello was defined by vocal quality, correct reading and physical presentation. These black actors spoke in dialect, butchered Shakespearean language, and looked ridiculous. Proper Shakespearean acting became impossible for blacks to achieve.

Snipe was not the only person who saw the black Shakespeareans as an opportunity for comedic public mocking. Charles Mathews, a famous English actor, traveled to the United States and visited The African Theatre where he was hosted by Hewlett. Hewlett saw a bond between actors; Mathews saw an opportunity to create a show mocking the black Shakespeareans. In “Trip to America,” the show he performed based on the experience, Mathews mocked Hewlett’s reading of Hamlet. One report of the show stated that “we are presented with an amusing recital of what Massa means for to be or not to be! The strange alterations in the text are most ludicrous; but the play is soon interrupted, and the exhibition concludes by Hamlet’s singing a “Real Negro Melody.”<sup>85</sup> When Hamlet is supposed to “take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them,” apparently Hewlett did not say “opposing” but “opossum” leading the audience into a which a chorus of “opossum up a gum tree,” the “real negro melody.”<sup>86</sup> Even if this was fictional, the language Mathews used had the real effect of positioning blackness in opposition to Shakespeare. Shakespeare provided opportunities to dehumanize blacks. Blacks were inferior; more specifically, they were un-Shakespearean. The legitimate Shakespeare was constructed as non-black through minstrelized depictions of blacks who were mocked for improper behaviors.

Finally, several facts about the African Theatre support the idea that Shakespearean whiteness was entrenched in the very institutions of the city. First of all, the publisher of the

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<sup>84</sup> *The National Advocate*, September 21, 1821.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 147.

<sup>86</sup> For a powerful dramatization of this event, albeit historically fictional, see Carlyle Brown, *The African Company Presents Richard III* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1994).

preceding critiques of the African Theatre in the *National Advocate*, Mordecai Noah, was also the sheriff of New York. Noah had the power to condemn the theatre's work in print while legally authorizing the police to shut it down. The African Theatre suffered from legalized white violence and unequal justice in several ways: twelve members of the New York "watch" forcibly shut down a performance; white rioters stopped another performance and were not prosecuted for inciting violence; the theatre moved to Mercer Street, was burnt down, and no one was ever found guilty of arson; Ira Aldridge, William Brown, and James Hewlett were all violently beaten by whites for their public presence in New York, and no record exists that anyone was prosecuted for the crimes. Certainly it was not just Shakespeare that was threatening, but theatre itself, and the public display of freedom of the actors of the African Theatre. Yet it was intensified because Shakespeare was so important to the white men who objected to the black presence in the city. In his 1849 *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, The African Roscius*, Ira Aldridge reflects on the events of The African Theatre: "riots ensued, and destruction fell upon the little theatre...there was no protection or redress to be obtained from the magistracy....nothing but envy prevented the blacks from putting the whites completely out of countenance."<sup>87</sup> Shakespeare was made white by magistrates, the press, the sheriff, and violent men who used the inequity of the justice system to ensure whites owned the Bard exclusively. White Shakespeare was forged in violence and in terror.

### An American Hero

Edwin Forrest is not typically discussed alongside black Shakespeareans and the events of the African Theatre. Like much of theatre history, his biography is segregated from an understanding of how race was being made in the nineteenth century. Forrest's story is well-documented in nineteenth century theatre history narratives; traditional biographies and

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in White, *Stories of Freedom*, 96.

textbooks discuss his significant contributions to the development of the American theatre and his status as the first American theatrical star. Yet Forrest was the epitome of this new kind of white New Yorker who was fearful of amalgamation and a free black presence. Forrest was a self-made working class hero who brought raw American energy to the stage. He owned a newspaper that espoused Jacksonian ideals. Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, Forrest also found himself at the center of the 1834 race riot, successfully advising a riotous mob at the Bowery to direct their energy elsewhere. Forrest embodied the ideal of the white male identity that fueled the riotous energy. The “anti-amalgamators” at the Bowery theatre were his people.

Forrest’s success as Othello was enabled by his whiteness. By playing the Moor in New York for a mind-boggling forty-six years (1826-1872), Forrest became the biggest theatre star in American history to that point. Yet as the quashing of black Shakespeare reveals, Forrest’s Shakespearean celebrity was only possible because he was white. From the beginning, the economic and cultural capital that came with his performances was tied to the fact that society saw him as a white man. This fact is no revelation, and could be said of many aspects of nineteenth century New York culture that, as a rule, excluded blacks. Less obvious is how the Forrest legend and Shakespearean discourse furthered the language of whiteness. The white identity that was a prerequisite for the existence of his Othello was given depth, specificity, and power through language of correct performance and tradition that further embedded whiteness in the very definition of the “Shakespearean.” Forrest’s popularity did not run parallel to racial change in New York, but was a phenomenon that was supported by the advantages of whiteness and defined through the language of race.

There have been several extended studies of Forrest’s performance in *Othello*. Rosenberg wrote a chapter on Forrest’s artistic choices as the Moor and the fact that he became a real-life

Othello in his jealousy-driven divorce proceedings. Edward Kahn discussed it in a chapter called “The White-Working Man’s Othello” and raises the interesting thesis that it was his savage otherness that made him particularly popular among Bowery audiences.<sup>88</sup> Barbara Alden was the first to detail the performance in her 1956 essay “Edwin Forrest’s Othello,” and in her dissertation on the subject in 1950.<sup>89</sup> It is also mentioned in most stage histories of *Othello* as a landmark performance that put an American stamp on Shakespearean performance.<sup>90</sup>

In contrast to these essays, I look at the performance in the context of the preceding discussion of whiteness and Shakespeare. I argue that Forrest became a white comparative against which all New York Othellos were judged. Further, Forrest’s performance heightened New Yorkers popular ownership of the story as one that spoke to general truths of human nature that applied to white America. Like the critics of Kean and Cooper, Forrest’s critics used notions of Shakespearean correctness to evaluate Forrest’s Othello. Finally, following in the tradition of Edmund Kean, Forrest presented a lightened Othello that was more palatable to an audience who wanted to maintain its hero-worship of Shakespeare and developing ideas of race.

In 1826 the legitimate New York stage was introduced to Forrest, its first “native tragedian.” Two months after Kean made a showing at the Park Theatre as Othello, the twenty-two year old Forrest debuted with his own version of the Moor. His impulsive stage passion and frontier bravado made his Othello uniquely American. *The New York Mirror* wrote in superlatives about his talent and ability to embody human nature: “He looks to nature for models,

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<sup>88</sup> Kahn offers little direct evidence to support his thesis. It is a common sense conclusion, but it is inconsistent with other more typical reactions which focus on how deeply they felt for his Othello and related to his story. What is compelling about Kahn’s thesis is the suggestion that there were different popular and legitimate understandings of Othello. I largely agree with this thesis, though I think that the control of the legitimate theatre could not be absolute. Further, the popular understanding of his blackness could serve positive ends when applied to abolitionist causes.

<sup>89</sup> Barbara Alden, “Edwin Forrest’s Othello,” *Theatre Annual* 14 (1956): 7-18. Several biographies also detail his Othello including William Rounseville Alger’s *Life of Edwin Forrest, The American Tragedian*, 2 Volumes (1866; rpt. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972).

<sup>90</sup> See Hankey, Edelstein, Vaughan, and Matteo for examples of stage histories of the performances.

and to his own genius for instruction.”<sup>91</sup> From the beginning he was compared to others who had played the part. *The Evening Post* referred to his “genius” and that aside from Kean “the third act of Othello has never been better performed upon our boards.”<sup>92</sup>

Many New Yorkers wholeheartedly claimed Forrest as their own godlike hero. One *New York Mirror* reviewer in 1827 wrote: “Like the enchanted edifices of oriental story, he seems to have sprung into a beautiful existence, without the aid of time. (Forrest) displays the brilliancy of genius, a depth of feeling, an acquaintance with the workings of the human soul, and a grasp of intellect, which already rank him among the greatest.”<sup>93</sup> New Yorkers elevated Forrest to the level of transcendental artist. His life story became an American myth that was perpetuated by a largely sympathetic press.<sup>94</sup> Unlike Kean and Cooper, Forrest was an American with whom white New Yorkers could relate. The press highlighted his poor upbringing and incredible success with the masses:

In the fall of 1826, Forrest appeared...for the first time in the character of Othello; the power and beauty of that performance made a deep impression-and the actor, then a boy, unheralded and unknown, became suddenly famous-the theatre was crowded nightly by an audience that testified with wild applause their admiration of his performances, and the papers of the day seemed with laudatory notices of the actor. He who came to New York a poor, friendless young man, on a salary of twenty-five dollars a week.-In less than

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<sup>91</sup> *The New York Mirror*, July 1, 1826.

<sup>92</sup> *The New York Evening Post*, July 8, 1826.

<sup>93</sup> *The New York Mirror*, February 24, 1827.

<sup>94</sup> Forrest’s popularity also extended beyond the theatre. People craved personal details; *The Dramatic Mirror* in 1842 printed a question from a woman who while “at a private dinner party the other evening” had heard “that in the early part of (Forrest’s) theatrical career, he came very near connecting himself with an equestrian company, and had actually joined their corps.” People talked about him at dinner parties and the press printed anecdotes about his personal life.



six months, had achieved so wide and proud a fame, that Gilfert for his own profit, spared him to other theatres for \$200 a night.<sup>95</sup>

He was a self-made man from humble beginnings. *The Albion* summarized this relationship to the people in 1848:

The masses are with him...He has created a school in his art, strictly American, and he stands forth as the very embodiment, as it were, of the masses of American character....Mr. Forrest in his acting is not merely the embodiment of a national character, but he is the beau ideal of a peculiar phase of that character-its democratic idiosyncrasy... Mr. Forrest has touched the hearts and jumped with the tastes of the majority of his countrymen. Witness the furor of audiences...the simultaneous shouts of applause, which follow his great efforts: see the almost wild enthusiasm that he kindles in the breasts of his auditors.<sup>96</sup>

His performances inspired strong emotions, uncommonly enthusiastic applause, and were defined by a uniquely American sensibility.<sup>97</sup> Forrest created unforgettable memories in the hearts of his viewers: “who will not treasure up whilst memory hosts her seat his thrilling delineations of Lear’s misfortunes, of Othello’s agony...yes, these are recollections that must embalm for long, long years this gifted actor in the minds of all who have either sensibility or

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<sup>95</sup> “The Drama,” *Brother Jonathan* 6, Issue 11 (November 11, 1843): 301.

<sup>96</sup> “Drama,” *The Albion* 7, Issue 36 (September 2, 1848): 428.

<sup>97</sup> Though this discussion focuses on race and gender, Forrest was also instrumental in igniting the class tensions that came to affect New York performances of Shakespeare for a generation. Forrest’s democratic American approach to Shakespeare was in conflict with high-brow critics and arbiters who judged the suitability of his audiences and the effectiveness of his acting. What some people called the “masses,” others called vagrants. In 1834, *The American Monthly* lamented that the lower prices at the Bowery Theatre “have opened the doors to an audience that in a great measure preclude persons of better feelings and conduct, and of greater discrimination.” *The Literary World* in 1847 stated that “Mr. Forrest, it has been said, has had the critics against him, and the people on his side.” *The Albion* wrote “who will deny that Mr. Forrest has got the heart, nay the ‘very heart of hearts’ of the masses, however he may have failed to conciliate the full approbation of the strictly critical and the fastidious!”

intelligence to feel his magic touch, or comprehend his excellence.”<sup>98</sup> Edwin Forrest was one of the people. Through his performance, *Othello* became about the audience and about the possibility of America. Forrest became a part of New York history.

As these reviews illustrate, Forrest’s *Othello* spoke to many New Yorkers, increasing the personal identification that a growing theatre population had with the play. Forrest helped revolutionize New York theatre from the late 1820s to the 1840s by appealing to a broad audience. Bruce McConachie calls Forrest the “Andrew Jackson of his profession,” arguing that the theatre of upper-class paternalism began to wane in the mid-1830s, and a “theatre of yeoman independence” appeared in its place.<sup>99</sup> Forrest became the living embodiment of the working class American hero in the playhouses of New York during these years, especially in the less refined Bowery Theatre. At a performance of *Othello* at the Park Theatre in 1838, he was “greeted with a strong reinforcement of his friends from the Bowery, who filled both pit and boxes to overflowing.”<sup>100</sup> The Bowery b’hoys championed his American spirit and ensured his early success.

And yet Forrest was also successful at embodying the ethnic “other.” One of his most popular was the Indian character of “Metamora.” *Metamora; Last of the Wampanogs* by John Augustus Stone was a prizewinner at his self-created American playwriting contest. Forrest’s performance was received as a true depiction of a noble savage. “He is wholly Indian,” *The New York Mirror* wrote, “his action, his walk, the inflections of his voice, his guttural ejaculations, his whole performance of the part is in strict accordance with our notions of the Indian character...we do not wonder that they drew tears from the women of the Penobscot Indians who

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<sup>98</sup> “Theatrical Gossip,” *The United States Magazine* 22, Issue 118 (January 1848): 88.

<sup>99</sup> McConachie, 72.

<sup>100</sup> “The Bowie Knife Again,” *The New-Yorker*, May 12, 1838.

recently witnessed the performance in Boston.”<sup>101</sup> Forrest embodied the essence of the Indian so successfully that, according to the *Mirror*, real-life Indians wept. Portraying essentialized racial characteristics were built in elements of Forrest’s success in other productions. His fame grew alongside and through racialized language.

*Othello* was also ostensibly about an ethnic other, but unlike *Metamora*, it was written by the cultural icon William Shakespeare. Forrest’s performance of Othello was not another “noble savage” but a contribution to a growing American tradition of Shakespearean acting that had begun to establish its own rules of legitimacy and correctness. In the review of *Metamora*, the importance of this distinction was made clear. Before he discussed *Metamora*, the writer celebrated Forrest’s Othello, writing “we can hardly consent to descend from Shakespeare to so inferior a production.”<sup>102</sup> While, according to the reviewer, Forrest’s *Metamora* was a good performance in a bad play, his Othello was “one of the most triumphant exhibitions of histrionic genius that has been witnessed on the stage.”<sup>103</sup> The legitimate performance of Othello was not in the same category with the new playwriting, nor was his ethnicity comparable to *Metamora*. Shakespeare meant something different. The potential racial meanings of Othello were muted by the hero worship of Shakespeare and the actor-genius.

Forrest’s Othello, and many critics who wrote about it, contributed to whiteness by consciously distancing the legitimate performance from American blackness. Edwin Forrest’s Moor was not meant to be a black man. A review of his Othello in *The New York Mirror* in 1836 complimented Forrest for this choice: “There is a popular mistake extant, and it has lately been worked upon by one whose learning out to have taught him better, that the Moors of African

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<sup>101</sup> *The New York Mirror*, December, 14, 1833.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

origin,” he began.<sup>104</sup> Forrest by contrast, “looked the warrior Moor-the chief selected by a powerful and warlike nation to lead on their armies to the fight-the descendant of a long illustrious line of ancestry, famed in the annals of gallantry and the songs of the troubadour.”<sup>105</sup> According to the reviewer, Shakespeare wrote a non-black hero that Forrest properly embodied. Language was given to human physical difference in many areas of New York life, making a conclusion such as the visibility of a person’s “long illustrious line of ancestry” not ridiculous, but common sense. When Forrest played Othello, using lightened makeup to play the Moor had become the established norm. From 1830 on, the standard practice on the New York professional stage was to play Othello not as a black man, but a slightly darkened ambiguous “other.” Edelstein notes that Kean’s lightening of Othello continued to influence stage production for several generations, creating a “so-called bronze age of *Othello*.”<sup>106</sup> The darkness of the skin on the professional stage differed among artists (and became less pronounced by the 1860s), but there are few references to actors intending Othello to be a black man.<sup>107</sup> James Rees stated that Forrest “conformed to the custom of the country, and made him one of mixed breed.”<sup>108</sup> A critique of a poorly done performance of *Dr. Faustus* at the less-regarded Chatham theatre led one reviewer to remark, “the Faustus of the Chatham is no more to compare with the Faustus of the Bowery, than skim milk is to cream cheese, or nigger of the five points to Forrest’s Othello.”<sup>109</sup> The race of Forrest’s Othello was so distinct from black men that the reviewer saw on the streets of New York that the comparison was humorous.

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<sup>104</sup> “The Drama,” *The New-York Mirror*, November 26, 1836.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Edelstein, 359.

<sup>107</sup> Other Othellos at the time followed suit. Anderson’s Othello, whose image was printed in *The Weekly Herald* in 1844, represented a typical rendering of the character. He is definitely an “other,” but not one whose ethnicity is easily identified. Called an “Arab,” a “Moor,” or an “Oriental,” Othello’s race was not clearly defined. “Stars at the Park Theatre,” *The Weekly Herald*, September 7, 1844.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Kahn, 168.

<sup>109</sup> “New York,” *The Dramatic Mirror* 2, Issue 6 (March 19, 1842): 45.

The most common characteristic of printed reactions to Forrest's Othello, however, was the absence of a discussion of race. Edward Kahn argues that Forrest's success can be explained by the fact that it was a savage "other" being consumed by the white working class; however, its popularity can also be explained by the fact that New Yorkers empathized with the story of the heroic Othello and Desdemona. For many, the play was not about race, but about a universal theme of jealousy. The *Anglo American* described his Othello as a noble man, praising Forrest's performance as one that illustrates "the jealousy brought into a fine open mind."<sup>110</sup> He was not the other, but one of the people, "our distinguished tragedian." *The Pathfinder* writes of his Othello that "The elevation of his nature lifts him at once into the region of tragedy...this magnanimity is Forrest's own."<sup>111</sup> Forrest's biographer, Alger, echoed these sentiments. He argued that Othello was his best role because people were so impacted by it that they "sobbed" in the aisles as he expressed the Moor's "great soul."<sup>112</sup> It was not a fearful blackness he gave the audience, but "an exquisite moral beauty."<sup>113</sup> The performance was a gift where "he permitted the audience to see the vast dimension and intensity of his love, doubt, agony, sorrow, despair, vengeance-and the revelation was appalling in its solemnity." Far from the savage embodied, Forrest "did not make a horror of the killing as Kean did."<sup>114</sup> One "refined and lovely young lady" famously remarked after seeing Forrest's Othello, "if that is the way Moors look and talk and love, give me a Moor for my husband."<sup>115</sup> These audience members saw the performance as engendering empathy and intimacy, not revulsion and savagery. For many New Yorkers

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<sup>110</sup> "The Drama; Park Theatre," *The Anglo-American* 9, Issue 21 (September 11, 1847): 501.

<sup>111</sup> *The Pathfinder*, Issue 9 (April 22, 1843): 134.

<sup>112</sup> William Rounseville Alger, *Life of Edwin Forrest, The American Tragedian, Vol. II*, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1877), 775.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 770

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 770.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Rosenberg, 93. This was an oft-repeated anecdote.

watching Othello at these theatres, race was not a problem. Forrest and his Othello were about them.

The comparison with famous actors of Othello that began in the early nineteenth century only intensified in subsequent decades, and reviews of Forrest's performance were scrutinized within this history. *The New World* commented that "the last time we saw Forrest act was in London, in "Othello," and we were much gratified by his personification of that arduous character. We had seen it acted by all the finest English tragedians-by John Kemble, Young and Kean-and with our recollections of all their varied excellencies still fresh in our minds , we were delighted to find that America could produce an actor capable, we will not say of rivaling those great Masters of the Art."<sup>116</sup> He added that "at the Bowery the other night, he constantly reminded us of Kean. To play Othello was to continue to be evaluated in comparison with others. *The Pathfinder* celebrated that Forrest's strengths had been Kean's deficiencies writing "what Hazlitt thought Kean wanted in this character, Forrest supplies."<sup>117</sup> One reviewer wrote "on Saturday he made ample amends in Othello, which we consider to be his best, as it was his first Shakespearean character. Since the death of Edmund Kean, Forrest may lay claim to this part as his own, and the actor who wrenches it from his grasp, will achieve a triumph worthy of lasting fame."<sup>118</sup> In the eyes of this writer, Othello actually belonged to Forrest, having inherited it, like a piece of property, from Edmund Kean. Interestingly, when Hewlett did Shakespeare, the language of property was employed with the opposite connotation. According to the *Star*, he "stole" the performance: "his histrionic education took place under those celebrated masters Cooke and Cooper, whom he followed as a servant boy, and stole their action and attitudes in

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<sup>116</sup> *The New World* , January 8, 1842.

<sup>117</sup> *The Pathfinder*, Issue 9 (April 22 1843): 134.

<sup>118</sup> "Baltimore," *The Dramatic Mirror* 2, Issue 4 (March 5, 1842): 31.

moments of recreation or recreation.”<sup>119</sup> The language of performance as property was written into Shakespearean embodiment, creating it as a white-owned product.

The discourse of the correct Shakespeare also influenced the production and reception of Forrest’s Othello. In *The New-York Mirror*, Forrest was celebrated for conforming to the true Shakespearean vision: “In the words of one of the first dramatic critics of the day, ‘the Othello of Shakespeare is mild, quietly dignified, sweet in the pathos of affection and sorry, and terrible in the agonies of jealousy and the tumult of revenge.’ How truly and beautifully did Forrest personify this picture of the masterpiece of the creations’s bard!”<sup>120</sup> Underlying this critique is the assumption that one can point to the “Shakespearean” qualities of Othello such as his dignity and use it to praise performance. Forrest was a good Othello because he was Shakespeare’s Othello.

In the midst of the celebration, certain critics would still not let Forrest do injustice to Shakespeare. In *The New York Mirror*, one critic wrote that Forrest delivered the lines at the council chamber “with good emphasis and discretion,” but that “we think Mr. Forrest places too much stress on the word honesty, when speaking of his ancient.” He later adds “we know of no authority for Mr. Forrest’s reading of the lines ‘than but to know too little’ ...the text of Shakespeare is ‘than but to know’t a little...the new reading is nonsense.”<sup>121</sup> By consulting the “text,” the *Mirror* critic reinforced the idea that Shakespeare had to be done properly. *The Literary Gazette* adjudicated Forrest’s suitability for Othello: “his figure is handsome and commanding; his voice more sonorous than sweet...we could observe much expression in his face, and a capability of casting into it, with truth and nature, all the passions required in

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<sup>119</sup> *The Star*, December 22, 1825. Quoted in Thompson, 165.

<sup>120</sup> “The Drama,” *The New York Mirror*, November 26, 1836.

<sup>121</sup> *The New York Mirror*. May 3, 1828.

Othello.”<sup>122</sup> The language of this review repeated the idea that there was something “required” in Othello that the actor must realize. There was a universal “truth” and “nature” that Forrest could access through his portrayal.

The conflict between Forrest and William Macready that led in part to the Astor place riots of 1849 was justified through Shakespearean correctness. Forrest insisted that he had a right to hiss at Macready’s performance in the theatre not because of poor acting, but because he did injustice to Shakespeare: “on the occasion alluded to, Mr. Macready introduced a fancy dance into his performance of Hamlet...which I hissed-for I thought it a desecration of the scene, and the audience thought so, too; for, in a few nights afterwards, when Mr. Macready repeated the part of Hamlet with the same “tomfoolery,” the intelligent audience greeted it with a universal hiss.”<sup>123</sup> Regardless of the truth of the account, the justification relies on an idea that Shakespeare must be performed correctly and should not be done an injustice. Shakespeare was enlisted as an enforcer of personal and cultural values.<sup>124</sup>

While it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss each performance of *Othello*, it is important to note that the language of comparison and correctness was not an isolated phenomenon specific to Forrest, but characteristic of the way Shakespeare was received and explained in mid-nineteenth century New York. Forrest was not the only artist subjected to the idea that Shakespeare performances should be done correctly. *The New York Herald* criticized J.R. Scott’s Othello for having “one or two mis-readings of the text originating in carelessness or in supposing that the Chatham audience are not particularly familiar with the works of the Bard

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<sup>122</sup> “Mr. Forrest’s Othello,” *The Literary Gazette* 3, Issue 10 (November 11, 1826): 117.

<sup>123</sup> “The Drama,” *Literary World* 3, Issue 96 (December 2, 1848): 877.

<sup>124</sup> It is also true that Shakespeare could be used freely in other circumstances. Levine has rightly argued that Shakespeare could be freely used by many, but it is also true that these expressions were often judged on a rubric of Shakespearean correctness, forming a competing discourse that made Shakespearean meanings the property of an elite few.



of Avon.”<sup>125</sup> An opinion essay explained the rise of “the musical mania” by saying that “the public are heartily tired...of the legitimate drama. They are sick of seeing Shakespeare murdered and mangled and even the best actors must soon exclaim with the Moor, “Othello’s occupation is gone.”<sup>126</sup> In 1858, *The Albion* called Edmund Kean “the true Othello of Shakespeare.”<sup>127</sup>

A review of E.L. Davenport’s Othello in *The Spirit of the Times* is about both tradition and Shakespearean correctness:

In the closing scene, Davenport is effective to a degree far surpassing every other actor of the part I have seen, with the exception of the elder Kean whom I saw in my boyhood, but whose “Oh fool, fool, fool,” I can never forget to my dying day. Macready played this scene, as he did the whole play, with all that artistic ability that so eminently characterized him, but it struck many good judges here that if there was less Macreadian art, there was a great deal more of Shakespearean nature in our young countrymen’s personation of the Moor.<sup>128</sup>

Each of these critiques is authorized by the “true,” and by the “Shakespearean,” but none explains the characteristics of correct Shakespeare. “The Shakespearean” was subjective, constructed, and functional.

And the “Shakespearean” was white. New Yorkers identified with Forrest as a hero and with Othello as a tragic creation. Shakespeare spoke universal truths through Forrest, and his performance became the standard against which others would be judged. Critics discussed his performance with a language of Shakespearean correctness, furthering a discourse that used an assumption of Shakespeare’s intents to justify performance criticism and social ideologies.

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<sup>125</sup> “Theatrical,” *The New York Herald*, June 14, 1841.

<sup>126</sup> “The Musical Mania,” *The New York Herald*, December 3, 1843. Before Shakespeare became “highbrow,” the “legitimate” Shakespeare performance was also distinguished against performances that included music and dance.

<sup>127</sup> Raimond, “Music,” *The Albion* 36, Issue 10 (March 6, 1858):115,

<sup>128</sup> “The Drama in New Orleans,” *Spirit of the Times* 26, Issue 20 (June 28, 1856): 230.

Forrest made this whitened Othello more popular. The construct of the true “Shakespearean” and the performance history of *Othello* were not always described in explicitly racial language with Forrest’s performance. However, by constructing the universal themes of Shakespeare through white identity, history, and performance, and against notions of blackness, white New Yorkers increased their stranglehold on the property of *Othello*.

### Literary Critics and Othello

Starting in the early nineteenth century, New Yorkers were regularly exposed to written criticism of *Othello* as a text of literature. In this section, I argue that literary critics made Othello white through the language of Shakespearean correctness and by employing racial common sense logic. Common sense dictated that Othello was white because of his actions: the noble behaviors Othello performed, and especially his act of marriage to the white Desdemona, made him necessarily unlike African Americans. The literary white Othello was also often a gendered construct. For many critics, it was through assumptions about Desdemona’s womanhood that the clarity of Othello’s non-black identity came into focus.

The idea that Othello was a black hero was a problem for critics who revered Shakespeare and believed in the inferiority of blacks. Like many actual Americans on the margins of black and white in nineteenth century America, Othello endured a kind of racial trial.<sup>129</sup> To determine if Othello was “black,” scholars evaluated if he properly acted whiteness. In New York, the “natural” roles of women and of African Americans were prescribed through sermons, science, and a Jacksonian construct of white masculinity.<sup>130</sup> Shakespearean critics strove to make sense of Shakespeare’s intents because *Othello* seemingly violated common sense

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<sup>129</sup> For a discussion of these trials, see Ariela Gross, *What Blood Won’t Tell* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>130</sup> For a discussion of Jackson, see Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (New York: Verso, 1990); Michael Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Knopf, 1975).

understandings of race. Before Kean, the standard thinking about Othello and Desdemona was that this was an example of a white woman being with a black man. Critics had to create a new idea of Othello's race that was reconcilable with their developing understandings of race. The stakes were high because New Yorkers so celebrated the genius of Shakespeare that it was difficult to admit he made so egregious a mistake to color a noble person black.

In 1811, attempts were being made to distance Othello from blackness. In an issue of *The Literary Miscellany*, Othello is described as the "peerless tragedy" of "one of the most memorable personages whose character and exploits are recorded, either in fictitious or legitimate history." After establishing the play's status as a work of genius, the author argues that Othello's blackness is "absurd:" "though the vulgar idea, which figures him black, as an African is absurd, yet he is unquestionably tawny."<sup>131</sup> By not offering any explanation as to why it is absurd, the author participates in a form of common sense racial thinking. Othello was not black because the idea was contrary to his understanding of race.

Others offered clearly articulated justifications of Othello's non-blackness. In 1825, *The New York Mirror* summarized a more comprehensive logic for whitening the character that linked practical theatrical concerns, racial ideology, and historical argument. The author wrote:

A European writer...considers it a gross error to make him a negro. "Othello" it observes, "was a moor, but not a blackamoor; and though in the tragedy he is called 'an old black ram,' there is no reason to suppose that he was much darker than the generality of Spaniards, who indeed are half-moors-and compared with the fair Venetians, he would even be black. There is a great variety in the colour of the Moors, and there is no reason why Othello should be of the deepest hue: swarthy or tawny he might be, but not black."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Port Folie, "An Author's Evenings," *The Literary Miscellany* 1, Issue 1 ( May 1, 1811): 41 .

<sup>132</sup> *The New York Mirror*, April 2, 1825.

For the *New York Mirror*, geography and history gave evidence that Shakespeare did not intend for Othello to be black. There were increased efforts to find reputable sources that disconnected the true Othello of Shakespeare from African Americans.

Other critics denied that Othello was black by affirming Shakespeare's intelligence. The romantic poet and Shakespearean critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously opined, "can we imagine [Shakespeare] so ignorant as to make a barbarous negro claim royal birth,-at a time, too, when negroes were not known except as slaves?"<sup>133</sup> According to Coleridge, we know that Othello is not a "negro" because Shakespeare was too smart to make that mistake. Though people have debated whether Coleridge ever actually said these words, this quote appeared in various newspapers and in New York editions of the play as scholars debated what Shakespeare must have meant in creating the character of Othello. Coleridge created the "Shakespearean" through common sense logic that negated the possibility of his blackness.

A writer in *The Nassau Literary Magazine* wrote an essay entitled "Was Othello a Negro?" In bombastic prose, he concluded emphatically that Othello "was not a negro."<sup>134</sup> He stated:

Long and doubtful has the controversy been with reference to this differentia of the noble and good Othello the first. This controversy is the luminary around which all lesser luminaries have resolved. Was Othello a descendant of the radiant Ham? To assert this is almost enough to cause Othello's spirit to spring...phoenix-like from his ashes to know whence came this bold assertion... No negro has "a round unvarnished tale." Othello had a 'round unvarnished tale,' therefore he was not a negro.

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<sup>133</sup> Quoted by W.J. Rolfe in "Some Shakespearean Questions. Was Othello a Negro?" *Poet Lore*, 10 (1898): 251.

<sup>134</sup> "Was Othello a Negro?" *The Nassau Literary Review* 29, Issue 3 (1874): 22.

The assertion that “no negro has a round unvarnished tale,” in addition to making very little sense, employs common sense logic: Othello was distinct from the American black person because the writer believed that blacks could not live unvarnished lives. Literary critics tried to distinguish Othello as Shakespeare saw him with the black men they saw in the streets.

As whiteness took root in New York, the textual references to Othello’s blackness had to be explained or explained away. The fact that Othello refers to himself as “black,” and that Roderigo utters the words “thick-lips” to describe him seemed to offer support to the idea that Shakespeare had indeed envisioned Othello as a black man. Roderigo’s reference to the ‘thick-lips’ of Othello was a problem because it was a perceived marking characteristic of African Americans.<sup>135</sup> In fact, Coleridge was troubled by the line enough to call it “the only seeming justification of our blackamoor or negro Othello.”<sup>136</sup> Yet Coleridge wrote that Roderigo could not be said to represent the ideas of Shakespeare himself, arguing “it is a common error to mistake the epithets applied by the dramatis personae to each other as truly descriptive of what the audience out to see.”<sup>137</sup> Charles Knight, whose editions of the play circulated throughout New York in the nineteenth century, agreed with Coleridge that Roderigo’s description means little. He wrote that “the expression ‘thick-lips,’ from the mouth of Roderigo, can only be received dramatically, as a nick-name given to Othello by the folly and ill-nature of this coxcomb.”<sup>138</sup> For him “the whole context of the play is against” Othello being seen like an African American.<sup>139</sup> In his edition of the play, Knight concedes that “although in the tragedy Othello is described with a minuteness which leaves no doubt that Shakespeare intended him to

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<sup>135</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello: A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, edited by Howard Horace Furness (New York: Dover Publications, 1886).

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Furness, 389.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in Furness, 389.

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in Furness, 390.

<sup>139</sup> Quoted in Furness, 390.

be black there is no reason to supposed that the Moors were darker than the generality of Spaniards.”<sup>140</sup> Black just meant that Othello was darker than the “curled darlings.” It did not imply that he was the same race as African Americans.

In *Shakespeare's Scholar*, Richard Grant White found his justification for the non-black Othello in an assumption of Shakespearean correctness and common sense thinking. In his table of contents, he listed the plays to be discussed and on a couple of occasions had a subheading. Under Othello is the heading “Othello not a Negro.”<sup>141</sup> He wrote that “I could never see the least reason for supposing that Shakespeare intended Othello to be represented as a negro.”<sup>142</sup> He was instead a “moor...a warlike, civilized, and enterprising race, which could furnish an Othello whereas the contrary has always been the condition of the negroes.”<sup>143</sup> White argues for Othello's non-black status by arguing that it was not what Shakespeare “intended.” He assumes that all agree that “negroes” are not capable of being civilized and enterprising. White justified the line about “thick-lips” by stating that Shakespeare simply did not understand what he was talking about: “he had, doubtless, never seen either a Moor or a negro, and might very naturally confuse their physiological traits.”<sup>144</sup> The fallibility of common sense racialized thinking is revealed in White's contradictory arguments. On one hand, he argued that Shakespeare did not know what he was doing; on the other hand, he argued that Shakespeare clearly distinguished Moorish from “negro” behavior.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Kahn , 33.

<sup>141</sup> Richard Grant White, *Shakespeare's Scholar* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1854), xlii.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 432.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Also, the assumption that Shakespeare did not know any Africans is not rooted in historical analysis, but common sense assumption There is significant evidence that Africans were present in Shakespeare's England, not the least of which is the edict by Elizabeth I to banish Africans from England See Ania Loomba *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Anthony Barthelemy, editor, *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Othello* (New York: Macmillan 1994), 183.

Prominent scholar Henry Reed justified Othello's whiteness through Shakespearean history. He argued that "the repulsive notion that Othello was a black, -a course featured African,-seems to me directly at variance with the requisitions of both poetry and history."<sup>146</sup> To prove his point, he wrote that Othello "was one of that adventurous race of men who, striking out from the heart of Arabia, had made conquest of Persia and Syria; and, overturning the ancient sovereignty of Egypt, swept in victory along the whole northern coast of Africa."<sup>147</sup> This history linked Othello to a white lineage that took over Africa and "who had been sovereigns of Europe."<sup>148</sup> This ostensibly historical argument, however flawed, reveals the length scholars went to, to disconnect the Othello of Shakespeare from American blackness.

After the Civil War, literary critics continued to use Shakespearean correctness and common sense thinking to rationalize Othello's whiteness.<sup>149</sup> Mary Preston's famous criticism of the play reveals how Shakespearean correctness was employed to clarify an explicitly white Othello. Preston wrote a series of essays of Shakespearean criticism and introduced her book by stating that she was not going "to say anything very new to the reader. My aim has been to direct his attention to very old truths, which, amid the multifarious productions of our day, are often overlooked."<sup>150</sup> Her essay described the tragic flaw of Othello as one of "jealousy," but she argued with conviction that "bravery in Othello was a principle, not a mere impulse. Othello was a just man."<sup>151</sup> She celebrated the relationship of Desdemona and Othello, stating "how natural is the origin of this love-match...two hearts, impelled by different motives, unite together in

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<sup>146</sup> Quoted in Furness, 393.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Furness, 393.

<sup>148</sup> Quoted in Furness, 393.

<sup>149</sup> Though my discussion of stage Othellos ends in the antebellum years in this chapter, I have decided to discuss literary criticism in the same section because it represents continuity with the earlier discourse. In chapter four, I will discuss how playgoing changed significantly in the 1850s, and 1860s, which makes a discussion of stage representations necessarily separate.

<sup>150</sup> Mary Preston, *Studies in Shakespeare: A Book of Essays* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, and Haffelfinger, 1868), ix.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

love. Othello is brave; Desdemona is timid. Othello is a plain, artless soldier; Desdemona is a beautiful, accomplished lady.”<sup>152</sup> Preston’s Othello and Desdemona were a loving couple with righteous souls unfortunately afflicted by an outside evil. After creating Shakespeare as a universal playwright and Othello as a play about jealousy, Preston dealt with race. Her conclusion revealed the racial worldview that enabled her interpretation:

In conclusion, let me add a word of explanation to my reader. In studying the play of Othello, I have always *imagined* its hero a *white* man. It is true the dramatist paints him black, but this shade does not suit the man....Shakespeare was too correct a delineator of human nature to have colored Othello black, if he had personally acquainted himself with the idiosyncrasies of the African race.<sup>153</sup>

Common sense told Preston that Shakespeare could not have known the “idiosyncrasies of the African race.” The last sentence of the essay put an emphatic exclamation point on this argument as Preston reiterated “Othello *was* a *white* man!”<sup>154</sup> These comments encapsulate the major themes in the other critics’ racial logic. Preston affirmed Othello’s whiteness by claiming authority of Shakespeare’s intentions, celebrating his universality, and using common sense to argue that Shakespeare could not have thought him black.

For many, Desdemona figured prominently in their racial constructions. Several scholars justified Othello’s non-blackness through their understandings of white womanhood. Coleridge wrote “it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro. It would argue a disproportionateness, a want of balance in Desdemona.”<sup>155</sup> Desdemona, a proper white woman, would not choose to be with a black man.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>155</sup> Quoted in Furness, 390.



Henry Reed stated “on every account, it is better to clear the fancy of this false conception of Othello’s black colour, most of all for the sake of our sympathies with the gentle Desdemona; for if we are brought to believe that this bright, this fair-faced Venetian lady was wedded to a black, we should almost be tempted to think that the monstrous alliance was fitly blotted out in its fearful catastrophe.”<sup>156</sup> If Desdemona did choose to be with a black man, the murder and suicide would not have been tragic, but justified-“fitly blotted out.”<sup>157</sup> The imagined relationship threatened not only because Othello was a black male, but also because Desdemona represented the purity of white womanhood.

Henry Hudson used the authority of Shakespeare, racial common sense, and his ideas about gender to justify the non-black Othello. Hudson was a minister who toured the city of New York giving lectures on Shakespeare and the downfall of society, which he saw most clearly evidenced by the feminist movement of the 1840s. Hudson wrote that “it would seem, from Othello’s being so often called “the Moor” that there ought to be no question about what the Poet meant him to be. For the difference between Moors and Negroes was probably as well understood in his time as it is now; and there is no more evidence in this play that he thought them the same.”<sup>158</sup> Hudson knew what the Poet “meant” and used his assumption of Shakespeare’s intentions to advance the idea that Negroes were inferior. Yet if it was Shakespeare that made sense of Othello’s race, it was Hudson’s understanding of gender explained the last two acts of the play. “Desdemona cannot be persuaded her husband is jealous,” he wrote, because “it is true, and I hope always will be true, that women are not very good

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<sup>156</sup> Quoted in Furness, 394.

<sup>157</sup> In the interpretation of the play, “manhood and womanhood” were thus created as “racialized constructs.” See an excellent discussion in Cheryl Harris, “Finding Sojourner’s Truth.” *Cardozo Law Review* (November 1996): 9.

<sup>158</sup> H.N. Hudson, *Lectures on Shakespeare. In Two Volumes. Vol. II.* (New York: Charles Scribner 1857), 326. In one of his editions of the play, Henry Hudson directly declared “Othello not a Negro.” He went on to reiterate common sense arguments: “with the Negroes... the Venetians had nothing to do; but they had much intercourse with the Moors, who were a civilized, warlike, enterprising race, such as might well furnish an Othello.”

reasoners, their heads being generally merged, at least up to the ears, in their hearts.”<sup>159</sup> Hudson believed that Othello’s murder of Desdemona, given the fact that he thinks her guilty of adultery, was noble and justified. Further, Desdemona was a perfect woman because of her acquiescence during the murder: “meek, uncomplaining, submissive even unto death where she owes allegiance, her character is not of the sort to take with a self-teaching, self-obeying generation.”<sup>160</sup> Desdemona was a lesson in womanhood to a generation of perceived equal rights activists who “have been taught that the husband is to obey the wife as much as the wife the husband; and our next lesson probably will be, that the parent is to obey the child as much as the child the parent. O, divine science of equality!”<sup>161</sup> He sees that this will be overcome, however, because “nature is still too strong for them.”

Perhaps many were convinced that Shakespeare’s messages were clear because they made his language about them and their system of values. Critics allowed common sense to serve as evidence. One scholar wondered “Can anyone suppose that he copied his complete self when he portrayed Othello?” He questioned if Desdemona was “none other than the veritable Mrs. Shakespeare.”<sup>162</sup> Richard Grant White wrote in an issue of *The Galaxy* that Shakespeare has “an intuitive knowledge of human nature.”<sup>163</sup> When White read Othello he was “moved with a sense of admiration and wonder which, if I allow it to continue, becomes almost oppressive.”<sup>164</sup> Shakespeare’s messages were universal, he argued, and “it is difficult to conceive any age or any country in which ‘Othello’ would not be an impressive and a welcome play to any intelligent audience.” It would fall out of favor, he argued, only when “there is a radical change in human

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> “Shakespeare,” *Circular* 2, Issue 31(October 16, 1865): 242.

<sup>163</sup> Richard Grant White, “On Reading Shakespeare Plays of the Third Period,” *The Galaxy* 23, Issue 1(January 1877):70

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

nature.”<sup>165</sup> By making Shakespeare and Othello the representatives of human nature, scholars gave them power and authority. By making themselves the ones who dispensed the knowledge of what Shakespeare meant, they gave themselves authority to define the normative qualities of a white “human nature.”

When Richard Grant White encountered Theodor Hildebrandt’s painting “Othello and Desdemona” at the Dusseldorf gallery in New York, he railed against its racial implications: “Hildebrandt’s Othello has, in addition to the Congo features, the negro gaudiness of dress and extravagance of action. He is repulsive, and we wish to see a solid wall built up between him and the lovely lady who looks upon him with such overflowing but perverted love.”<sup>166</sup> The encounter with Othello’s blackness clarified his belief in Othello’s whiteness. Being black was to perform “gaudiness” and “extravagance,” but Shakespeare’s Othello performed an enterprising spirit and royal carriage. Desdemona’s love with a black Othello was “perverted,” but the love of Shakespeare’s Othello was beautiful and pure. He concluded that “there is no fault in Hildebrandt’s conception, except that great, grinning blackamoor.”<sup>167</sup> The image of blackness, the “grinning” Othello, threatened more deeply than the words in the script.

### Othello as Cultural Metaphor

Hildebrandt’s painting also reveals another important reality about Othello’s presence in New York: the play did not just live in New York as a stage performance or in literary analysis, but also in other cultural forms that helped define the play’s meaning in the city. Theatre historians often justly privilege descriptions of the legitimate stage and the printed words of formal criticism as the most revealing documents in the quest to uncover a play’s historical meaning in a community. Yet this approach would limit the discussion of *Othello* in the

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Richard Grant White, 434.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

nineteenth century because New Yorkers knew Shakespeare's works and integrated his themes and stories into the language they gave to their daily lives. Shakespeare was not only being performed at the many theaters in town, but his language continued to appear in the real and fictional stories in the newspapers throughout the city. New Yorkers' identification with *Othello* extended beyond the theatre.

The common use of "Othello" in non-theatrical contexts began early in New York. In 1793, *The Daily Advertiser* criticized a man for being "fond of the marvelous, and without place, date, or circumstance, talks as wildly as Othello;" he quoted lines from *Othello* about the people whose "heads do grow beneath their shoulders" to support his point.<sup>168</sup> *The Argus* wrote a "parody on Othello" in 1796, which quoted "farewell the tranquil mind, hung be the heavens in black."<sup>169</sup> In *The Time Piece*, a short article called "murder and suicide" described a murdered wife who "found her husband, like another Othello, when she waked in the morning standing in a pensive attitude at her bed side which attributed to the excess of his passion for her."<sup>170</sup> This man metaphorically became Othello through his jealousy and rage. *Othello* helped describe the human condition and the events of life.

*Othello*'s metaphorical capacity and cultural presence expanded in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. When the Federalists won the "town of Essex" in 1808, *The New York Post* described the situation as "the bright glory of our state is eclipsed-Othello's occupation's gone."<sup>171</sup> In 1804, *The Weekly Museum* reported that the "New York Museum of Wax Work" was displaying a wax carving of "a scene from Shakespeare's Othello."<sup>172</sup> A horse named "Othello" was on display at the "Broadway circus" where he "will act the part of a Domestic" by

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<sup>168</sup> *The Daily Advertiser*, July 2, 1793.

<sup>169</sup> *Argus*, April 9, 1796.

<sup>170</sup> *The Time Piece* 2, Issue 134(July 23, 1797):3.

<sup>171</sup> "A Little more Plasteration," *The New York Evening Post*, May 6, 1808.

<sup>172</sup> *The Weekly Museum* 16, Issue 4 (January 28, 1804).

bringing “a whip, hat, basket” and “handkerchief” on command.<sup>173</sup> “Othello’s occupation’s gone” was a popular way to describe people that could lose their jobs. One reviewer noted that a book on homeopathy may cause “physicians, druggists and apothecaries” to have their “occupation as decidedly gone as Othello’s.”<sup>174</sup> The temperance movement threatened “the grog-seller” who “may soon exclaim with Othello, “My occupation’s gone.”<sup>175</sup> An update on the “Progress of dental surgery in America” forced the “quacks” to say “Othello’s occupation’s gone!”<sup>176</sup> In each of these examples, Othello represented an every-man who had lost his purpose.

*Othello* made other appearances in the papers and throughout the city. The “North River Fire Co., No 27” decorated their truck with Othello’s characters: “the painting on the back is a beautiful representation of Othello relating the history of his adventures to Brabantio and Desdemona.”<sup>177</sup> There was an entire essay devoted to Othello’s Act V, scene II utterance of “hpmuh” in the weekly *New-York Mirror*.<sup>178</sup> In an essay in *The Morning Herald*, a writer seeks solace in Othello’s advice that “to be once in doubt, is/ Once to be resolved.”<sup>179</sup> A growth in “amateur theatricals” led to more New Yorkers playing Othello. *The Morning Herald* described “a new movement” that “has sprung up in this city of everlasting changes and movements; and the decline of the regular theatres has either caused or been induced by a great rage for amateur theatricals.”<sup>180</sup> The aspiring thespians were not elite New Yorkers: “amongst other associations a number of young clerks...with a few interesting and pretty young milliner girls, have joined

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<sup>173</sup> *The New York Daily Advertiser*, June, 22, 1818.

<sup>174</sup> “Multiple News Items,” *New-York Spectator*, August 29, 1839.

<sup>175</sup> “Religious Intelligence,” *The New York Herald*, May 25, 1841.

<sup>176</sup> “Progress of Dental Surgery in America” *The New York Herald*, August 28, 1843.

<sup>177</sup> “North River Fire Co., No. 27,” *The Herald*, September 1, 1836. It is interesting that the scene the painting describes is not a dramatized scene in Shakespeare’s play. In the play, Othello tells the Senate that he told the stories to Desdemona and Brabantio, but we never see the actual wooing that the painting depicts.

<sup>178</sup> “Original Essays: Cassio,” *The New-York Mirror*, July 4, 1840.

<sup>179</sup> Joronus Lankjaw, “Sketches, Saraps, and Whim-whams-No. 1,” *Morning Herald*, September 11, 1838.

<sup>180</sup> *Morning Herald* March 27, 1840.

together, under certain articles of agreement, formed themselves into an amateur theatrical association.” They report that on this occasion “the part of Othello was acted by Mr. Timolet, son of the person who keeps the baths in Pearl Street.” Another report in the *Herald* described Othello being played by a “fashionable tailor in Broadway.”<sup>181</sup> *Othello* was on the major New York stages, but he was also found among a lower class that cleaned the baths and tailored clothing. *Othello* belonged to the many.

*Othello* was commercialized in the mid to late nineteenth century. There was a rise in the production and sale of the *Othello* text in New York, and Shakespearean lecturers toured New York with interpretations of the play.<sup>182</sup> *The New-York Spectator* advertised that a “Mr. Simmons” would be concluding his lectures on Shakespeare, including one on *Othello* at the Clinton Hall.<sup>183</sup> As mentioned, Henry Hudson made numerous lectures tours in the city, and in the words of one journalist “put people unaccustomed to the operation, to the trouble of thinking.”<sup>184</sup> By using the presumed messages of Shakespeare, Hudson’s lectures served to conserve traditional culture in the midst of a changing New York. “It is because his thoughts are old,” one journalist reported “that they are likely to be true. It is a circumstance worth mentioning that just now, in the lecture room of New York, the oldest and most assured truths are the most striking and novel.”<sup>185</sup> According to the essay, Hudson’s lectures celebrated Adam and Eve and insisted on the differences between men and women. For Hudson, Shakespeare gave biblical and moral instruction to the people of New York.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> “Recherche Amateur Theatricals,” *New York Herald*, February 2, 1842.

<sup>182</sup> For an example of an advertisement of the *Othello* text in New York, see “Advertisement 1” *Spirit of the Times* September 7, 1844. Also see Charles Lamb’s stories for children and the texts created for schools to examine the various ways that the story was influencing the culture. Charles Lamb, *Tales From Shakespeare: Designed for the Use of Young Persons* (New York and Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1813).

<sup>183</sup> “Multiple News Items,” *New York Spectator*, 19 December 19, 1839.

<sup>184</sup> “Untitled,” *Broadway Journal* 2, Issue 17 (November 1, 1845): 263.

<sup>185</sup> “Miscellany,” *The United States Magazine, and Democratic Review* 16, Issue 82 (April 1845): 411.

<sup>186</sup> See Kahn’s introduction for a discussion of the publication of *Othello* in book form.

*Othello*'s language also served various political parties in New York. The *Morning Herald* reported on a meeting of "the Whigs of the glorious old tenth" whose white speaker "told his hearers that he was, as Othello says, 'rude in speech,' and little blessed with the act of phrase of orators."<sup>187</sup> The New York "Board of Alderman" discussed the treatment of "imprisoned debtors," hoping that they may "like Othello, 'do the state some service.'"<sup>188</sup> Richard Mentor Johnson, the vice president of the United States under Martin Van Buren was apparently adapting his own version of the play: "The vice president is employed at intervals on a drama of absorbing interest, entitled 'Othello Reversed, or the Pleasures of Taste.' The first acts have already been put to press-the residue will be continued as the urgency of official duties will allow-'in two sheets-periodical.'"<sup>189</sup> In political discussion, *Othello* was not necessarily a racial subject even when both *Othello* and race were being discussed. The Democratic-run *The Herald* asked in one editorial "Is Othello's occupation gone? Are the miserable devils who support existence by some process unknown to the rest of the world, and follow the business of president-making, to be annihilated? We believe not...we leave that to "nigger Hamilton."<sup>190</sup> Another essayist laments that "Nigger-Mania" is making "everything black." The abolitionist is a "political Othello" calling out for "Blood! Blood! Iago!"<sup>191</sup> *Othello* could be a white person who commented on race. *Othello* could speak to people of various backgrounds, providing malleable metaphoric language for job loss, public speeches, and political disagreement.

*Othello* was also used as a testing ground for ideas of race and gender. "Snivers" snidely remarked that Desdemona's wish to be with Othello "is very natural in a young lady who might

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<sup>187</sup> "Multiple News Items," *Morning Herald*, April 9, 1840.

<sup>188</sup> "Board of Aldermen-July 2," *New York Spectator*, July 5, 1838.

<sup>189</sup> "Pointed Items," *New-York Spectator*, November 1, 1838.

<sup>190</sup> "The Political World-Is There to be another President? If So, Who?" *The New York Herald*, August 13, 1843.

<sup>191</sup> "Wisdom and Folly," *The United States Democratic Review* (July 1856):569. The writer's purpose in the essay was to inform his Southern Democratic brethren not to lump Northern Democrats in with the "Black Republicans" who called for bloodshed in the slavery debate.

possibly have had a predilection for flat noses.”<sup>192</sup> It was “a very natural wish considering the curiosity of the sex.” Snivers blamed Desdemona for being a woman that did not follow the path she should: she felt a desire “to wear the breeches.” Consequently, “Othello was most ignominiously ‘hen pecked.’” Though this was meant as parody, it nevertheless depended on a joke about gender and race. Othello was blackness emasculated and Desdemona abandoned her proper female role by asserting herself and choosing to be with a black man.

While this last example most directly applies to the larger themes of this chapter, the other uses of *Othello* are still important because they establish the play’s presence in the fabric of New York life. In early New York Othello was the legitimate performer and the amateur tailor; his image was in wax museums and his words described political change; he was the universal symbol of jealousy and a dancing horse. Shakespeare was simultaneously an authorizing tool of stage criticism and present in everyday life. And the importance of the play in daily life had racial implications. The integration of Othello’s meanings into the lives of white New Yorkers made the identification of Othello as black much less possible. If Othello was about the largely white audiences in New York, and could be freely applied to their lives, then the play could not also be about the blacks who they defined as another category of human. Black Americans simply did not belong to the universal humanity that whites identified with Shakespeare.

By the 1860s, Edmund Kean, Edwin Forrest, the critics, and the popular New York press made Shakespeare the property of white Americans, defining the boundaries of humanity through Shakespearean authority, white history, and a white-based universality. Before Othello became black-authored, Shakespeare became white. The “Shakespearean” was defined through the strong white male body, resonant voice and a correct intelligent reading of Othello.

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<sup>192</sup> William Wizard, “Theatrics,” *Salgamundi* (March 20, 1807): 117.



## CHAPTER 2: THE WHITE-MADE BLACK OTHELLO

Or Othello was black. In the early nineteenth century, New York critics and theatre artists reinforced the racial assumptions underpinning the white Othello by developing his foil. The insistence on Othello's difference from African Americans coexisted with a parallel discourse that explained the negative traits of the character through his blackness. On the stage, in the popular press, and through the streets of the city, the Moor thus generated segregated and contradictory understandings: Othello was either white and heroic or black and criminal. The character held both possibilities and was invoked, seemingly on a case-by-case basis, to authorize racial ideologies. Othello's blackness was employed by white scholars and critics as the cause of his jealousy and violence at the end of the play. More typically, Othello was painted black in the popular white press to describe perceived amalgamation and black-directed violence in the streets of New York. While actors whitened the heroic stage Othello, newspapers called real African Americans "Othellos" when they committed crime. In a city terrified of racial amalgamation, journalists wrote that black men acted the role of Othello when they engaged in interracial relationships. Othello's blackness was also popularly assumed on the minstrel stage where entertainers such as George Griffin and T.D. Rice developed the Moor as a stupid, criminal, and sexual character. In this chapter, I detail the popular understandings of Othello in the New York press and place them in dialogue with minstrel adaptations, the legitimate Othello performance, and the literary criticism of the play. In contrast to previous studies that have focused on evaluating the characteristics and quality of the performances on the major stages of New York, I privilege the community's response to the play, detailing how New Yorkers used the play to help explain their fears over racial change. I argue that New Yorkers contributed to an ideology of whiteness by using Othello's blackness to outline negative traits of blacks in general.

In this chapter, I also detail the responses of white abolitionists who contested these ideas by associating Othello's blackness with his dignity. *Othello's* meanings were incoherent, contradictory, and served various ideological purposes. In this discussion I examine the circumstances in which Othello's blackness was used to interpret the play and explain the real events unfolding in New York. Like the white Othello, the black Othello was consciously made, indeed, consciously chosen, through language that largely supported white authorship and ownership of Shakespeare and his plays.

To explore the white-created black Othello, it is important to return to Othello's performance history to examine how perceptions of the character's race changed on the legitimate New York stage in the nineteenth century. Before he was distanced from blackness, there was a two-hundred year European stage history of the legitimate black Othello. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, evidence suggests that in New York the "black" Moor was also the theatrical convention. In 1794, *The Weekly Museum* printed a bill belonging to "a theatrical man of prosperity's" that lists a payment "for cork and butter to make Othello's face black."<sup>1</sup> *The New York Evening Post* stated in 1801 that "we have been accustomed to see Othello with the black complexion of a negro."<sup>2</sup> William Winter remarked of John Henry's Othello from the mid-eighteenth century that his "face was black and his hair woolly."<sup>3</sup> In 1811, *The Weekly Museum* printed an anecdote of one "itinerant thespian" playing Othello who was so upset with the "thin house" assembling before him that he "cried d—e, if I black my face for such an audience as this; a white moor is good enough for them and white moor they shall have too."<sup>4</sup> This choice was "to the surprise of all present" as the actor played the role "with his face

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<sup>1</sup> *The Weekly Museum* 6, Issue 312 (May 3, 1794).

<sup>2</sup> *The New York Evening Post*, December 21, 1801.

<sup>3</sup> Winter, 262.

<sup>4</sup> "Anecdotes," *New York Weekly Museum*, June 15, 1811.

as nature and stuff had coloured it.” In this instance, it was considered lessening the impact of Othello to whiten him. Before Kean, Othello’s blackness could be part of the thrill of the play and audiences may feel cheated if they did not experience it. The New York press circulated a remarkable story about a Southern production of James Fennel’s Othello. One southern audience member was so impressed by the performance that he asked the manager of the theatre if he could buy Fennel from him, as a slave, so convinced he was of Fennel’s black skin. The manager refused.

Though Othello was seen as black, many early New Yorkers did not express revulsion, but saw him as a legitimate Shakespearean hero. Even in early nineteenth century New York, Othello’s blackness was not necessarily inconsistent with a view of him as dignified and noble. Nobility, in fact, was one of the most common adjectives used to describe even the black Othello. In 1797, for instance, *The Time Piece* described Othello as a man of “generosity, nobleness of soul, simplicity, and love.”<sup>5</sup> Othello could be generous, noble, loving, and black.

From the beginning, however, the association of Othello with blackness troubled other viewers. While certain audience members insisted on Othello’s blackness, others detested it. *The New York Spectator* reported on a performance of Othello as “one of the most remarkable instances with which we are acquainted of the illusion produced by theatrical exhibitions.”<sup>6</sup> In this production, a white man playing Othello was just about to smother Desdemona when he was shot dead by a man who said “no d---d negro shall ever murder a white woman in my presence, if I can help it.”<sup>7</sup> This blurring of fiction and reality when it came to blackface performances of Othello was not uncommon. Othello’s blackness caused contradictory responses; it fulfilled some and threatened others

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<sup>5</sup> J. Alphonso, “For the Time Piece,” *The Time Piece* 2, Issue 27 (November 15, 1797): 2.

<sup>6</sup> *The New York Spectator*, October 12, 1821.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. The anecdote is repeated in several periodicals, but I was not able to corroborate its veracity.

Complicating the disagreement was the fact that audiences did not always see their idea of blackness in these performances. “Thespis,” took issue with the fact that “Mr. Cooper gives him (Othello) a swarthy, copper, hue.”<sup>8</sup> “Snivers” similarly wrote in *Salgamundi* that he “found fault with Cooper for not having made himself as black as a negro.”<sup>9</sup> Fennel’s performance was criticized in *The Theatrical Censor* in 1806 which took “a decided exception to his color. He was rather a Red-man than a Moor.”<sup>10</sup> Even when actors intended to portray a black Othello and audiences thought his blackness correct, the subjectivity of theatrical response disrupted the coherency of racial meanings: reading race on stage was not objective science. As he entered the racially turbulent nineteenth century in New York, Othello’s blackness was embraced and denied. It was normal and a source of outrage.

Critics’ use of Shakespearean correctness intersected with their racial interpretations. To support the black Othello, *The Evening Post* evidenced “the expressions used in the tragedy,” and the fact that a dark color “would give more character and better warrant that part of the Moor’s jealousy which is founded on the difference of complexions.”<sup>11</sup> Blackness was thus not only textually correct, but a rationalization of Othello’s negative display of jealousy. *The Theatrical Censor* justified the aforementioned objection to the “Red” Othello through textual analysis as well: “this inconsistency was the less pardonable, on account of the references so frequently made to the black complexion of Othello; references which ought to over-rule all arguments founded on the unfavorableness of a black skin to the display of the passions.”<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare’s text, he argued, was more important than what the audience may consider to be unfavorable. Snivers also went to the text to support his racial reading, writing “that Othello was

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<sup>8</sup> Thespis, “Theatrics, Critique No. 6,” *The New York Evening Post*, December 21, 1801.

<sup>9</sup> William Wizard, “Theatrics,” *Salgamundi*, Issue 6 (March 20, 1807): 117.

<sup>10</sup> “Othello,” *The Theatrical Censor*, Issue 11 (January 6, 1806): 98.

<sup>11</sup> “Theatrics, Critique No. 6,” *The New York Evening Post*, December 21, 1801.

<sup>12</sup> “Othello,” *The Theatrical Censor*, Issue 11 (January 6, 1806): 98.

an arrant black appears from several expressions of the play, as for instance, thick lips, ‘sooty bosom’, and a variety of others. I am inclined to think...that Othello was an Egyptian by birth.”<sup>13</sup> In these reviews racial meanings were authorized by Shakespeare’s script; Othello was black because Shakespeare said he was.

As the story of the African Theatre reveals, however, by the 1820s the association of blackness and Shakespeare had become a problem for white New York. In chapter one I argued that many New Yorkers were able to accommodate Edwin Forrest’s performance of Othello with new racial understandings. Forrest was an American hero whose Othello could communicate universal truths and passions to a largely adoring public. It is also true, however, that select reviewers linked Forrest’s performance of Othello with blackness. He was described as “a big black man” in the *Courier and Enquirer*, and a *New York Clipper* reviewer said that he had “the idea of a ‘live nigger’ before him” when watching his Othello.<sup>14</sup> One letter to the *New York Clipper* said of Forrest’s Othello: “E. Forrest is playing at The Broadway Theatre. We saw him play in a trashy sort of a piece titled “Othello,” which, like all things in this country, panders to the popular taste for niggers...E. Forrest, who took the character of the jealous nigger, may do well enough in white characters, but in pieces like this he utterly fails.”<sup>15</sup> The writer inserted everyday references in his interpretation, such as the idea that Othello “wanted to marry Horace Greeley’s daughter” and that Othello smothered Desdemona with a pillow from the “Freedman’s Bureau.” He concluded that “it was truthful to nature,” but “with all due deference to the author...we think he would do better by sticking to the sensation drama; people who want to see nigger pieces, go to the minstrels...who not only act like the colored race, but *talk* like them.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> William Wizard, “Theatrics,” *Salgamundi*, Issue 6 (March 20, 1807): 117.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Kahn, 168.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Clipper*, September 9, 1867.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

In the logic of the writer, Othello did not speak like a black man, but acted black by killing Desdemona. The performance of violence was true to the writer's perception of the nature of African Americans. For him, Othello's blackness was an indictment of the play and the author. Shakespeare should have written only sensational drama, he argued, because this performance was not worth watching. Further, the performance was enlisted to make social commentary about volatile racial relations in New York. Othello's blackness was useful common language to critique the perceived support of amalgamation of Horace Greeley and his newspaper the *Tribune*. *Othello* offered support to his idea that the Freedman Bureau's support of black rights lead to violence against white women. Though intentionally satirical, this letter nonetheless reveals that the racial meanings that Forrest's Othello could generate were not absolute or generally agreed upon. These interpretations of the legitimate Othello were rare, but their conclusions were reinforced by a popular culture that commonly linked Othello's blackness with crime and amalgamation.

### The Criminal Black Othello

Dan Rather famously stated that the 1994 O.J. Simpson white Bronco chase reminded him of Shakespeare's *Othello*. This caused furious scholarly activity on in a Shakespeare discussion group as academics made the same associations or condemned Rather's comments and racist associations.<sup>17</sup> Yet while many scholars have condemned Rather's statements, few have historicized the analogy. In fact, Rather's comments participated in a long history of linking violence with Othello's blackness. In this section, I argue that the New York popular press used Othello's blackness as common language to describe real life black crime, perceived amalgamation, and black sexual deviance. Othello was made black in the press when he

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of how scholars themselves discussed the connection of Simpson to Othello on "SHAKESPER" see Edward Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 1-3.

performed negative behaviors that confirmed “scientific” conclusions about the natural inferiority of the black race. Though the popular usage of his blackness came to opposite conclusions about Othello’s race from the legitimate white Othello discussed in chapter one, both contributed to an ideology of white supremacy.

In 1818 a story came out of New York that made *Othello* a metaphor for black crime in the city. A white man was said to be reading *Othello* quietly in his New York hotel bed when he heard a sound at the moment “when he was most interested with the bed chamber scene.”<sup>18</sup> When this man looked under his bed he found “a gigantic black, who had concealed himself there for the purpose of robbery, or something worse.” The irony of the situation was made clear: “Here was OTHELLO personified.” The “lodger” grabbed “the black” and facilitated his return to the prison from which he had just been released. This personified Othello served as a cautionary tale to future “lodgers in large hotels” who “would do well to ascertain, before they get into bed, that no one lurks beneath it.” This story anecdotally illustrates Shakespeare’s presence in everyday life, depicting as normal a man reading Shakespeare in bed.<sup>19</sup> The writer also associated a black Othello with certain behaviors: he was a criminal just released from prison; he was about to steal the lodger’s belongings; and he was potentially on the verge of committing violence, of doing “something worse.” To be a black Othello on the streets of New York was to perform the existing stereotypes of the criminal black man.

In the 1820s, Mordecai Noah and others in the white press also linked the black Othello with crime. Criticized for their laughable performances of Shakespeare’s plays, several

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<sup>18</sup> “Look Under Your Beds: New York, December 28” *Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser* (December, 30 1818): 3.

<sup>19</sup> Though I start in 1818 and focus on crime, there is also evidence from the eighteenth century that links Othello’s name with blackness. Othello” was a name for a popular horse that produced desirable offspring that were often advertised for sale in New York periodicals. “Othello” was a name given to many slaves, some of whom found their stories in the New York press, especially when they tried to escape.

representatives of the African Theatre appeared in Noah's *Advocate* as successful performers of criminality. The first Black man ever cast as Othello in America was a former slave who may have never played him. Charles Beers instead gained recognition for robbery:

Charles Beers, another black, of better address and more engaging manners... was indicted, tried and convicted of the same offence, and was sentenced to the state prison ten years. His case deserves some notice and is submitted to the sage consideration of the lovers of the drama and the members of the manumission society. Several black gentleman in the City, actuated, no doubt with a laudable emulation, recently resolved to open a theatre: they organized a dramatic corps, at the head of which was the prisoner, who actually appeared on the stage several times, and sustained the character of Richard the third and Othello. "I am determined to prove a villain." The offence, for which he has to act his part in the state prison, consisted in stealing a trunk containing about \$100, in cash, and a quantity of cravats, and other clothing, the property of Thomas Grumbold, of which a part was found in possession of the prisoner.<sup>20</sup>

By performing the act of larceny, Beers performed blackness. Another description of his crime made the same link, describing Beers as a member of "the black corps dramatique" who was convicted of "grand larceny" which meant "10 years hard labour in the state prison."<sup>21</sup> *Othello's* language was employed to describe the end of his criminal life: "Othello's occupation's gone." In quoting the play, the writer made Beers a real-life Othello. Othello was a black man when committing larceny.

James Hewlett, the eventual star of the African Theatre, also gained notoriety as a criminal and real-life black Othello. The New York *Sun* reported that "James Hulett, a mulatto

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 79. Little is known about the life of Charles Beers (sometimes known as Charles Taft). For all the documentary evidence about Beers at the African Theatre, see Thompson, pgs 75-79.

<sup>21</sup> *The National Advocate*, November 19, 1821.



man and as he styles himself, “the proud representative of Shakespeare’s heroes,” was convicted of “grand larceny.”<sup>22</sup> Hewlett “made a speech, denied the larceny-acted Shakespeare in the prisoner’s box, and marched out with the air of an Othello to the cage.” The perceived display of Hewlett’s arrogance when answering for his crime bothered the writer, who commented that he “strutted into the police office with a most ludicrously consequential air.” Black New Yorkers were described for their performances even when they were not on an actual stage-this “proud representative” threatened on the street as well. Hewlett was similarly described in the *New-York Gazette* as “the ebony representative of Shakespeare” who “was yesterday tried at the Special sessions for larceny and performed Othello to the life.”<sup>23</sup> While Shakespeare’s Othello never performed larceny, he was called upon nonetheless. Hewlett’s story reinforced a popular link between the black Othello and criminal actions.

Other African Americans not associated with the African Theatre also “played” Othello in the crime blotter. Unlike Hewlett and Beers, these men were often linked to events or themes from Shakespeare’s play. “Thomas Little, a big black man” was called “A Negro Othello” in one newspaper headline. Little was “charged with enacting the part of “Othello, the jealous nigger” by attempting the “destruction of his wife” when he suspected her of cheating on him.”<sup>24</sup> Othello was painted black in the streets of New York when he performed in real life the violence dramatized in Shakespeare’s play. Writers associated an unrestrained impulsive jealousy with the black Othello. An article about the “Centre Street Othello,” for instance, described a man who was “arrested for firing a pistol at a colored girl” in an effort to “prevent her from living with another man.”<sup>25</sup> In *The Morning Herald* it was reported that “John Mackintosh, a coal black

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<sup>22</sup> *The New York Sun*, June 21, 1834.

<sup>23</sup> *New-York Gazette & General Advertiser*, June 23, 1834. Quoted in Thompson, 200.

<sup>24</sup> “A Negro Othello,” *The Herald*, February 28, 1837.

<sup>25</sup> “City intelligence” *The New York Herald*, November 11, 1843.

negro” was “convicted of whipping his wife, a very light colored negro wench.”<sup>26</sup> Apparently John’s defense was that his wife “was worse than the cunning one of Venice that married with Othello.”<sup>27</sup> That there are many examples linking the black Othello to jealousy and violent crime in numerous New York periodicals is an indication that the metaphor was a common depiction.

Further, it was an ongoing discourse not localized in the press of the 1830s and 1840s. In June of 1860 the popular *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* described a “Mrs. Rhodes” who “eloped with a mulatto,” and stole 2500 dollars from her husband.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, “the Othello-colored villain next day cut his Desdemona’s throat and threw her into the river.”<sup>29</sup> In an editorial warning, the blurb concluded “the folly of some women is astounding.” This blunt description highlights another aspect of the criminal black Othello: his violence struck white women who themselves were culpable for associating with black men. Their murders were expected and their “folly” was “astounding.” Others similarly depicted the violence in a casual tone. *The New York Herald* described “The Green Eyed Monster-Attempt at Murder” in November of 1861. “Samuel Murray, a negro sailor about thirty years of age” attempted to kill “a bright eyed mulatto girl.” “Othello forced his way into Miss Julia’s apartment and confronted the terror stricken couple. The gentle Desdemona first fell a victim to his ‘awaked wrath,’ and then the obnoxious rival was...thrust in the neck with a sharp pointed weapon.”<sup>30</sup> The performance of the black race in New York was the story of Shakespeare’s black Othello. For the white press, his example of jealousy and violence outlined their meanings of blackness and in so doing, created the qualities of their own whiteness.

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<sup>26</sup> “General Sessions,” *The Morning Herald*, March 23, 1840.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, June 30, 1860.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *The New York Herald*, November 28, 1861.

The white-authored black Othello's capacity to describe real crime continued throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, reinforcing a perception that African Americans were prone to violence. *The National Police Gazette* described a "Fatal Row in a Slum" in which "a negro barber" shot "Charlotte Bowman, a white woman" in the chest. The woman had been following him and was in a fight with other white women who disagreed "who among the women...should receive the caresses of the sooty "Othello.""<sup>31</sup> Another article was called "A later Othello," and described "A burly Negro's Frenzied Jealousy of his Pretty but Frail Mulatto Spouse."<sup>32</sup> A cartoon image from *Life* magazine in 1889 illustrated the perceived comic potential of the criminal black Othello and its enduring power to connect to a broad-based audience. "Pictorial Shakespeare" showed a black man laboring in his prison uniform. The caption quoted Shakespeare's text, sampling Othello's defense in the trial scene of Act I: "I have done the State some service, and they Know it."<sup>33</sup> The image was a visual performance of the criminal black Othello that had previously only been described by the press. Black Othellos in America were prisoners, whose "service to the state" was not in the military like Shakespeare's Othello, but in the jails where they were forced to work. That the quote was used in a popular magazine like *Life* is an indication that a reading public continued to know Shakespeare well. It also indicates, like Dan Rather's commentary in the late twentieth century, that linking the performance of crime to the blackness of Othello was not an isolated discourse of a small group of racists, but a widespread phenomenon capable of speaking to great numbers of Americans.

### Amalgamation

Shakespeare's Othello also represented a prototypical amalgamationist in the popular New York press. In chapter one, I argued that the legitimate white Shakespeare was born in

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<sup>31</sup> "Fatal Row in a Slum," *The National Police Gazette*, June 29, 1878.

<sup>32</sup> "A Later Othello," *The National Police Gazette*, September 14, 1878.

<sup>33</sup> "Pictorial Shakespeare," *Life*, May 30, 1889.

New York at the same time that whites became increasingly aware of their racial identity. The Shakespearean was distinguished from blackness as whites fought a perceived increase in amalgamation of the races. Yet because Othello could also be black, the language of white supremacy, amalgamation, and Shakespeare often directly intersected in the Democratic papers of the New York press to describe real-life relationships between people of different races. The metaphor of Othello the amalgamator had power because Shakespeare and whiteness had power. It was common practice to invoke Othello to describe black violence against white women, who were also marginalized for choosing interracial relationships. A *New York Courier and Enquirer* report from 1839 warned readers with the heading “Practical Amalgamation-Its Horrors.” It told the story of a woman from Scotland who was “induced” to travel to New York with a black man who said he possessed wealth and a good life in New York. When they arrived in New York, she found “that she had been deceived by her ‘Othello,’” and consequently begged him to leave. This Othello became so angry that he kicked her and hit her in the face repeatedly until she was unresponsive.<sup>34</sup> Choosing to be with black men led to violence. In 1837, *The New York Herald* reported

The following persons were convicted, arraigned and sentenced...Joe Thompson, a young black amalgamationist, for an assault and battery of a very aggravated character, on Mrs. Squerrel...Thick lipped scoundrels may now daily be seen in Broadway, ogling, in the most impudent manner, the ladies promenading there; and after dusk no respectable female can walk the street, without being accosted by some dun Othello or another, who having heard the orators of the amalgamation school, has taken it into his numskull,

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<sup>34</sup> *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette*, October 28, 1839, quoting the *New York Courier and Enquirer*.

“nigger little better than white folk-sumting” these fellows grow insufferable. They must be looked to.<sup>35</sup>

This kind of black Othello threatened a white way of life in New York. For many, the presence of the real life “Othello” demanded that action be taken to stop the advancement of the intermixing of races.<sup>36</sup> Shakespeare’s example of the black Othello was evidence in support of nineteenth century politics that fought for slavery and against equal rights for blacks in the city.

The papers marginalized “amalgamators” by portraying their relationships as unthinkable events. *The New York Advertiser* described “the most extraordinary case of amalgamation.”<sup>37</sup> It reported that a white man named John Hurd tried to come to New York with four black children. He was charged with kidnapping, but “to the astonishment of all there, he declared that the children were his own.” Another story on amalgamation reported with surprise that “a delicate, modest, educated, young white girl recently took an Othello to her breast in the bonds of matrimony.”<sup>38</sup> White women were in danger as black Othellos tricked them into unnatural marriages and sexual relationships.

And these women were weak. The fear of amalgamation was not just about race, but also about white women choosing blackness. To make this connection, journalists used Shakespeare’s *Othello* more extensively. In the metaphor, white New York Desdemonas were guilty for tainting the race by having sex with black New York Othellos. *The New York Herald* told of “a black fellow” who late at night was found “in company with a white woman.”<sup>39</sup> The woman was stopped by the police and repented, blaming Shakespeare’s *Othello* for her transgressions: “she

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<sup>35</sup> “Special Sessions,” *The Herald*, January 23, 1837.

<sup>36</sup> Many abolitionists, of course, also found interracial relationships repugnant, advocating not complete equal integration of blacks, but emancipation and limited citizenship or deportation to Africa.

<sup>37</sup> *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics*, October 10, 1835.

<sup>38</sup> *Farmer’s Cabinet*, June 21, 1839.

<sup>39</sup> *The New York Herald*, April 30, 1853.

confessed, with tears in her ears, that she had been reading Shakespeare's "Othello" and fancied herself another Desdemona-her lover another Moor of Venice."<sup>40</sup> An article on "Uncle Tom and His Effects on Society" in *The Weekly Herald* went much further in its indictment of the play. Women were seen to have "exposed their shame by actually eloping with them (blacks), leaving their husbands or the houses of their fathers, and throwing themselves and their purses into the arms of some strapping negro."<sup>41</sup> This "strange fancy" of "womanhood" to enjoy black men had only one historical example: "Poor Desdemona is the only lady who is recorded to have had such a weakness, and she expiated her unnatural love with her life."<sup>42</sup> He found it "very curious and interesting" that "the erring female...stated that her foolish act was instigated by her reading Othello."<sup>43</sup> *Othello* should not be read by women because they acted on its prescriptions, and the choice was a deadly one. White women would be killed by their black Othellos. As blackness and womanhood were mutually constructed in the white New York press, *Othello* could be blamed for instigating unnatural sexual mixing.

Proper women ignored the play. A performance of *Othello* in the Park theatre led one reviewer to remark that "there were not twenty females in the respectable part of the house. Why it was so we cannot imagine, unless it is that ladies do not fancy the practical amalgamation, broad speeches and pillow smothering of this blackamoor tragedy. We don't blame them."<sup>44</sup> To properly perform womanhood was to avoid the topic and images of amalgamation which could influence their behaviors.

In a race-obsessed New York, *Othello*'s metaphoric capacity expanded to describe other interracial relationships not explicitly involving black men and white women. "Alvoord Astrich,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> *The Weekly Herald*, May 7, 1853.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> *Morning Herald*, August 3, 1837.

a dashing yellow man” was tried “for shooting at Louisa Hewell, a lady of color, with a pistol,” causing the judge to opine “well I declare this is quite another Othello and Desdemona affair.”<sup>45</sup> Audiences that may not have believed in the credibility of the “amalgamation” in *Othello* were given real life examples, such as a “romance in real life” between an Indian man and a white woman:

Many people have denounced Shakespeare’s *Othello* too unnatural for probability. It can hardly be credited that such a fair, beautiful and accomplished woman, as Desdemona is represented to have been, could have deliberately wedded such a black-a-moor as Othello. But if we ever entertained any incredulity upon the subject it has all been dissipated by the occurrence of which we are to speak ....we heard the Indian and herself pronounced man and wife! It was the first time we ever heard the words “man and wife” sound hatefully.<sup>46</sup>

The fear of amalgamation bred hatred toward all groups defined as non-white. Another “New-York Romance” described a white woman who “was clandestinely married to a man by the name of Dean, an Irishman, who was her father’s coachmen.”<sup>47</sup> When this Irishman proved distrustful, the author wondered, “perhaps there is more in her Othello than shows.”<sup>48</sup> These examples indicate that while “whiteness” was often constructed in opposition to blackness, in the 1830s, it also excluded Indians and even the Irish. Before the Irish became white, they too could be amalgamating Othellos. The character helped define white identity in opposition to several non-white others.

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<sup>45</sup> *Morning Sessions*, January 13, 1838.

<sup>46</sup> *New York Spectator*, September 16, 1833.

<sup>47</sup> “News Items,” *Circular* 6, Issue 11 (April 2, 1857): 42.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

After the Civil War, when “amalgamation” became a blood-defined “miscegenation,” Othello’s interracial example continued to outline the characteristics of womanhood and blackness.<sup>49</sup> In one satirical review of Shakespeare’s play, “*Puck*” summarizes the plot in contemporary terms:

Othello a Moor, comes to Venice in search of an office, and, by his colossal assurance, gets one. He is said to have been of noble, aye, even of royal origin, but we only have his word this...he may have left a wife and half-a-dozen assistant wives at home, for he was a carpet-bagger-a Morocco carpet-bagger. And though he said he was a Moor, he was in fact an African, and therefore a colored man.<sup>50</sup>

The moral to this tragedy according to Puck was about “the danger a white girl incurs in being deluded into marriage with one of colored character.”<sup>51</sup> Like descriptions of real-life New York Desdemonas, this essay placed the blame on the Shakespeare’s heroine: “The willfulness, obstinacy, and most strange love of this young woman for her African lover is ultimately the cause of six first-class funerals besides other expenses.”<sup>52</sup> When white women chose black men, they could expect murder and violence. To prove that this black Othello was not a hero, he wrote “Othello may have been a brave man, but he was fearfully given to bragging. He boasted of his exploits like an Indian chief at a scalp-dance. This proves that he was a savage. Civilization does

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<sup>49</sup> Miscegenation is commonly employed anachronistically in scholarship that discusses *Othello* (even when discussing the Renaissance). However, it was a term that was born during the Civil War that had a specific reference to the mixing of bloods in a scientifically-based race thinking. The Oxford English Dictionary marks the first use of the term in 1863: “1863 *Rec. of Copyrights* (U.S. District Court, N.Y. Southern District) 29 Dec. 313 Miscegenation: The theory of the blending of the races applied to the American White Man and Negro,” <http://www.oed.com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/view/Entry/119267?redirectedFrom=miscegenation#>.

<sup>50</sup> “Othello-A Tragedy,” *Puck*, February 5, 1879.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



not brag.”<sup>53</sup> In this essay, Othello became black by performing sexuality, amalgamation, and “bragging.”

One brief article from an 1867 issue of *The National Police Gazette* claimed to tell a real life story of a wedding in New Orleans between a black man and a white woman. An accompanying cartoon featured a bewildered black man standing with a white woman at a church on their wedding day. The caption joked “Reconstructed and Unreconstructed Harmonizing in New Orleans.”<sup>54</sup> The article, “Strange Nuptials in New Orleans. Othello and Desdemona,” told the story of “a young lady who is said to come of rich and respectable parents in some remote State; and secondly, a back driver of such ebon hue that charcoal would make a white mark upon his face.” The writer played on knowledge of Shakespeare’s play while associating criminality with the black Othello; he wondered how the relationship could have happened: “in what manner Othello plead his suit, whether he told of his hair-breath escapes of being run over by dray drivers, or arrested by police officers or whether Desdemona loved him for the danger he had passed are doubts which no Shakespeare is yet able to solve.” The warning of the article is that such relationships do not last, in part because this black Othello was lazy. “The marriage has not since resulted as happily as might have been expected from one founded solely on love,” he wrote because “Othello’s occupation in the first place is gone; that is to say he is no longer willing to do anything-not so much as to curry his horses or himself.” Certainly the bride had realized upon “subsequent reflection” that “it was a mistake.” The author joked that if the bride ever consents to marry again it will be “with a horse of another color.” The message to deviant white women considering interracial relationships was that their black Othellos would

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> “Strange Nuptials in New Orleans,” *The National Police Gazette*, Dec 21, 1867.

be lazy criminals not able to fulfill their roles as proper husbands. The language of Shakespeare was again humorously invoked to reaffirm an ideology of racial and gender hierarchy.

Through the late nineteenth century, the New York press continued to present a view of the deviant female whose natural weakness made her prone to a seductive blackness. An article about “A Yankee Desdemona,” outlined the negative consequences suffered by white women who chose to become sexually involved with black men. The “Othello” was a “bigamous” wooer that won her heart “on the modern plan, realistic, and without the poetic ‘guff’ of the stage phototype of the ‘coon.’” Adolphus Hall, the Othello, was not motivated by a noble love, but by the fact that he “liked white meat, went for it and got it; and there’s all the romance there is to the affair.”<sup>55</sup> The crass reduction of the relationship to carnal desires reinforced the view that black men were naturally lustful around impressionable white women. The fault of the union, however, belonged to a disobeying Desdemona. “Her father’s commands and threats were unheeded,” the writer argued, “and at every opportunity she had clandestine meetings with Hall.”<sup>56</sup> The article ended with the lesson that white women and black men should not be together. Hall was found out to already have a black wife, and was consequently pursued for criminal charges of bigamy. The Yankee Desdemona, however, was “all the more infatuated with her Othello” upon learning of his other wife. The father meanwhile was “determined there shall not be a nigger in the family.” The article concludes with sympathy to the father: “too bad to bust romance like this, Mamie, but rich old papas with stamps have a cruel habit of drawing the color line at the door of the bridal chamber and this isn’t a good epoch for Desdemonas.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, it did not seem to be a good time for Desdemonas or Othellos. *Othello* provided

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<sup>55</sup> “A Yankee Desdemona,” *The National Police Gazette*, July 1, 1882.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

common language for white New Yorkers to illustrate the consequences of female deviance and black sexuality.

The popular use of Othello's blackness to marginalize and degrade blacks is an American tradition. When Dan Rather called O.J. Simpson another Othello during the white Bronco chase he drew from a long history of associating the character's blackness with sex and violence. The language continues to exist.

### Abolitionists and Sympathetic Whites

Yet, perhaps because Shakespeare's *Othello* was not only about violence and sex, others sympathetic to emancipation saw positive attributes in a black Othello. Abolitionists invoked Shakespeare's Othello to argue that African Americans could possess nobility and intelligence. Newspapers such as *The Emancipator* and Horace Greeley's *Tribune* contested Democratic perspectives on racial change. For them, Othello blackness was associated with the aspects of Shakespeare's play that depicted the character in a heroic light.

There are some early references to a noble black Othello before the abolitionist movement. In the *Gazette of the United States* in 1789, for instance, there is a rare positive example of Othello's blackness being associated with his royalty, as an "African Prince" is described both as "this extraordinary genius" and as "this second Othello." While infrequent, Othello's noble blackness had a history that dated back to the eighteenth century.

Abolitionists linked Shakespeare's black Othello with the cause to end slavery. *The Emancipator* reported on the slave mart at New Orleans where one slave "bound in fetters, and trampled in the dust" had "a dignity that might have lent luster to Othello himself."<sup>58</sup> Shakespeare's dignified Othello, like the dignified black slaves in America, was unsuited to enslavement. The same publication attacked slavery with Othello's language: "the *Richmond*

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<sup>58</sup> "The Slave Mart at New Orleans," *The Emancipator*, July 12, 1848.

*Whig* and the *Richmond Enquirer*, which seen governed by a spirit of mutual emulation in their efforts to throw the odium of the slavery discussion...will yet find that *their napkin is too little*.”<sup>59</sup> Abolitionists disagreed with Southern sympathizers over what Shakespeare’s words had to say.

The different applications of the play’s meanings came in conflict when the Amistad slaves landed in the U.S. Many in the press turned to the only African they knew to describe the event: Shakespeare’s Othello. The debate about what to do with the Amistad slaves brought political parties in conflict. For abolitionists, the royal carriage of the Africans was linked to Shakespeare’s noble Moor. *The Emancipator* noted that when the dignified African slave “Jingh” came into the room, “his bearing was like another Othello.”<sup>60</sup> For Democrats, the physical characteristics of the Africans made them unlike Shakespeare’s hero. Their publications rejected the association between the Africans and Othello. *The Morning Herald* criticized other “papers filled with preposterous twaddle” which were nothing but “absurdities put forth by the Abolitionists.”<sup>61</sup> The issue was stated in frank, racial terms: “the affair of the Amistad is a godsend to these men. They have already told lies enough to jeopardy the eternal welfare of half the negroes in Christendom...He says the blacks are as intelligent looking body of men as are often met with, and that Cinguez is dignified and graceful, with the bearing of Othello.”<sup>62</sup> To prove that they were not Othellos, the writer used the physical descriptions of racial science:

Cinguez is a blubber-lipped, sullen looking negro, not half as intelligent or striking in appearance as every third black you meet on the docks of New York. They are slothful, and thievish, and altogether are sunk in a state of ignorance, debasement, and

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<sup>59</sup> “Your Napkin is too Little,” *The Emancipator*, January 26, 1837.

<sup>60</sup> *The Emancipator*, September 12, 1839. *The New York Spectator* printed the same description four days later September 16, 1839.

<sup>61</sup> “The Captured Africans,” *Morning Herald*, September 17, 1839.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

barbarism....they are a distinct and totally different race, and the God of nature never intended that they should live together in any other relation than that of master and slave. I am no advocate of slavery, but I am clear in the conviction that the blacks can never be raised to a footing of equality with the whites, and that effort directed to this end is worse than useless.<sup>63</sup>

Invoking both the physiognomy of race and the common-sense assumption about the capacity of blacks, the writer distanced blackness from the noble part of Othello's story. A letter to the editor in the same publication confirmed this analysis: "instead of a chivalrous leader, with the dignified and graceful bearing of Othello, imparting energy and confidence to his intelligent and devoted followers, he saw a sullen, dumpish looking negro, with a flat nose, thick lips, and all the other characteristics of his debased countrymen, without a single redeeming or striking trait, except the mere brute qualities of strength and activity who had inspired terror among his companions."<sup>64</sup> Here Othello was not black because the context had changed. It was wrong to invoke the *noble* Othello of Shakespeare when describing the kind of the blackness displayed by the Amistad slaves. Far from being the warrior Othello, the writer found them to be "the veriest animals in existence, perfectly contented in confinement...the conclusion that I arrive at, therefore, is, that the monstrous perversions of fact of which the Abolitionists have been guilty, and their hypocritical and insidious appeals to the sympathies of the public, have operated to the serious disadvantage of blacks."<sup>65</sup> This familiar argument insisted that slavery was the best thing that could happen to Africans. Yet slavery did not suit Shakespeare's Othello, who was a free, royal, and noble non-black hero.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> "The Captured Africans," *Morning Herald*, September 18, 1839.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Another article about the Amistad slaves raised the specter of amalgamation. The writer saw the threat of interracial contact in “the negroes” who “are enjoying themselves in the prisons of Connecticut. The other day a lady sent up to the platform a pretty little boy of four years old, to Cinguez to be kissed and caressed by the new Othello...she enjoyed the scene so well that she sent up also a pretty little girl of six years old to get a kiss also, of the same desirable thick lips.”<sup>66</sup> Cinguez became a black Othello when he tainted whiteness with his sexuality and “desirable thick lips.” According to these various logics, the Amistad slaves were nothing like Othello’s nobility, but the mirror of his sexuality.

These cultural uses of the black Othello reveal several important characteristics about how white male identity was developing in New York. In chapter one, I examined how the legitimate stage Othello’s story was commonly employed as a metaphor for everyday life for whites and revealed universal human truths. Othello spoke to their experiences and was thus, from a white perspective, about *us*. Simultaneously, and in direct contradiction to this idea, it was about *them*. It was about the blacks who wanted to sleep with white women. It was about the black men who turned naturally to violence when free to act as they pleased. It was about what happens when women are tempted by the allure of black sexuality. As New York engaged in a new phase of scientifically-based race-making, *Othello* was invoked as an active participant. It was a paradoxical reading of the play, but the meanings of race were not logical either. This creation of white and black Othello depended on a series of logical contradictions. Both were in service to an ideology of whiteness that maintained white control of Shakespeare production and the meanings of the “Shakespearean.”

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<sup>66</sup> “A New Eienen in the Next Election of the Amistad Case: the Movements of the Abolitionists and Anti-Abolitionists,” *Morning Herald*, October 2, 1839.

## Othello and Minstrelsy

The minstrel adaptations of *Othello* theatricalized the black Othello, complementing the racial ideology explored in the mainstream press.<sup>67</sup> Popular from the 1830s through the 1860s, minstrel productions of *Othello* provided a communal space for a growing class of industrial workers to create a distinctly white identity.<sup>68</sup> The *Othello* parodies depicted Shakespeare's black character as stupid, lazy, and naturally violent, fueling a white self-definition that depended on degrading blackness. By embodying both blackness and the feminine, white men performing minstrel shows authored social, racial, and gender relationships. These adaptations associated the character of Othello with blackness, and blackness with the performance of stupidity, lust for the white woman, and criminality. While it is impossible in this section to do justice to the cultural significance minstrelsy held in the shaping of conceptions of race in America, and the damage it inflicted, it is important to frame the issues that drive the current interpretation of minstrelsy before analyzing the extant Othello minstrel texts.

Ralph Ellison famously challenged the legitimacy of minstrelsy when he advised artists to "slip the yoke and change the joke," fundamentally changing public perceptions of minstrelsy and the scholarship related to minstrel performance. Scholars have detailed the exact nature of the stereotypes that minstrelsy advocated. A recent strand of academic analysis links minstrelsy with harmful pro-slavery sentiments and the creation of whiteness. David Roediger and Alexander Saxton argue that the minstrelsy was not simply racist, but an active participant in the perpetuation of an ideology that linked blacks to the inferiority of the slavery system. Roediger develops an understanding of minstrelsy by connecting it to the birth of "whiteness," arguing that

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<sup>67</sup> Tyler Smith's dissertation on burlesque suggests that burlesque and minstrelsy are the *most* representative kinds of theatre because of their popularity. See his *Comedy on the Borders: Negotiations of Class through Parody on the Nineteenth-Century New York Stage* (Ann Arbor: Proquest Digital Dissertations, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Several pages of this section were published in *Theatre History Studies, Volume 31* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, Fall 2010).

“blackface minstrels were the first self-consciously white entertainers in the world” who created “a new sense of whiteness by creating a new sense of blackness.”<sup>69</sup> By performing the other, white workers in New York City defined the qualities of their own white identity, which was not only anti-black but also exclusively male. The minstrel show allowed men to “carouse in largely sexually segregated audiences,” affirming a collective masculinity with a collective whiteness.<sup>70</sup> The content of the minstrel show presented black characters that were submissive and happy “uncle Tom” slaves or mischievous untrustworthy urban “coons.” White definitions of blackness gave them economic and psychological power: blacks were depicted as inferior beings that not only enjoyed, but required the paternalism of the slavery system. Saxton writes that minstrelsy “not only conveyed explicitly pro-slavery and anti-Abolitionist propaganda; it was in and of itself a defense of slavery because its main content stemmed from the myth of the benign plantation.”<sup>71</sup> In effacing black identity, minstrel performers made themselves the owners of the definitions of blackness. In Saxton’s and Roediger’s analyses minstrelsy was born within and defined through the coming of capitalist industry, the justification of slavery’s expansion, and the poor urban white’s need to racially differentiate.

Other scholarship on minstrelsy has explored its psychological motives. In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott argues that depicting minstrelsy as unequivocally racist was a necessary challenge to the celebrated minstrel form, but that scholars have lacked nuance when understanding the role the minstrel show played among whites. Lott acknowledges as necessary Ralph Ellison’s critique of minstrelsy, but challenges how this anti-racist perspective has influenced the integrity of historical study, arguing:

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<sup>69</sup> Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 117, 116.

<sup>70</sup> Roediger *Wages of Whiteness*, 120.

<sup>71</sup> Saxton, 177.



In blackface minstrelsy's audiences there were in fact contradictory racial impulses at work, impulses based in the everyday lives and racial negotiations of the minstrel show's working-class partisans...there are reasons for thinking of blackface in the years prior to the civil war as a far more unsettled phenomenon than has been supposed"... it is not "uncomplicated and monolithic...in reading off from a text the stereotypes that a historical moment is presumed to have required it is typically presentist, and in viewing minstrelsy as the nail in the coffin of cultural containment it is rather narrowly functionalist.<sup>72</sup>

According to Lott, minstrelsy was not a site of racial inscription, but negotiation. The minstrel show was thus a liminal space of exploration where identities were tested and performed. The white male actor was simultaneously repulsed and drawn to the black male body with conflicted feelings of power and homoerotic desire. Lott argues that the impulse to create minstrel shows is not only a "theft" of black culture, but an expression of "love" toward it. Blackness then was not only to be distinguished against, but embraced in a ritual of masculine expression. Lott's revisions of minstrel scholarship are not meant to deny that the form was racist, but to explore the complicated meanings it contained.

This study supports Lott's idea that theatrical expression was about creation and negotiation of race, and was not a simple expression of pre-ordained racist ideology. However, at the risk of being "presentist," I will also argue that the minstrel adaptations of *Othello* primarily served to conserve and perpetuate the same racial ideologies found in the crime blotter of the popular press.

Before New Yorkers created formal minstrel productions, members of the press explored the potential of minstrel dialect. As the story of the African Theatre reveals, stereotypical black

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<sup>72</sup> Lott, 6,8.

dialect was being used for comic purposes in papers such as the *National Advocate*.<sup>73</sup> In 1828, Othello's humorous minstrel potential was explored in a fiction piece that appeared in *The Theatrical Budget*, which depicted a "real blackamoor" attempting to play Othello:

Now me show how act massa, Othelly speech to him father-in-law...Most patented sir reverences! /My very good massas! Dat I take away/ Old buckra man him daughter,/ It all true, true, no lie was/ Den she marry, I make her my chumchum, / Dat all I do, cause I do no more was!<sup>74</sup>

When applied to Shakespeare, the white-created black voice created a jarring and humorous inconsistency. This black Othello paraphrased the correct Shakespearean language into malapropisms and stereotypical plantation dialect, replacing "reverend" with "reverences" and "patient" with "patented."

When minstrelsy became more formalized and T.D. Rice "jumped Jim Crow," Shakespeare's *Othello* became a popular textual source. Minstrel *Othellos* allowed white Americans to combine a love and knowledge of the Bard's works with their racial obsessions. David Roediger writes in *Wages of Whiteness* that *Othello*'s content provided "particular opportunities to place sexuality, violence and high art within the nonthreatening confines of sentiment and of a hyper-emphasized blackface mask."<sup>75</sup> Numerous minstrel productions of *Othello* appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including *Desdemonum* (1854), George Griffin's *Othello; a Burlesque* (1866) and Maurice Dowling's *Othello Travestie* (1834), which was adapted by T.D. Rice for the American stage. While shows differed in focus and language, each depicted Othello as humorously incongruous with a noble Shakespearean character.

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<sup>73</sup> Indeed, some have identified Mordecai Noah, publisher of the *National Advocate* as the true father of minstrelsy for his development of minstrel language.

<sup>74</sup> "Humours of a Country Theatre; a Comical Story," *The Theatrical Budget*, Issue 1 (January 1, 1828): 18.

<sup>75</sup> Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 127.

George Griffin's *Othello; a Burlesque* creates a vision of blackness as sub-human, intellectually inferior, and violent. Published and performed in post-Civil War New York, the play reflects a society negotiating complex racial constructions. Each of the characters is in blackface, but only Othello is referred to as "dark." Iago is a blackface Irishman in love with Desdemona, whose ethnic slurs about Othello are written in brogue. Throughout the play, he calls Othello a "n-a-g-u-r." Brabantio is a heavy-drinking blackface German eager to fatten his daughter Desdemona so that he can sell her to P.T. Barnum. The characters break out into songs set to popular Irish and American tunes; Desdemona and Othello first appear dancing to the theme from "Dixie." Desdemona sings "With you I'll sport my figure, away, away-/ Ill love you dearly all my life, /Although you are a nigger. - Away, away, & c."<sup>76</sup> Thus the play in performance would have a white man in blackface playing a woman of German descent who differentiates her race from her black husband.

Race is the thematic centerpiece of the play. While Shakespeare's Iago expresses racist thoughts in scheming plots and monologues, the Iago of Griffin's burlesque proclaims them loudly in song:

When first I Desdemona saw, I thought her very fine,  
And by the way she treated me, I thought she'd soon be mine:  
But she's cleared out and left me now, with a nasty dirty fellar,  
As black as mud –a white washer- a nagur called Othello.  
But I'll kick up the devil's own spree with her for  
the way she served me,  
And the way I'll plague her for marrying that nagur,

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<sup>76</sup>George Griffin, *Othello; a Burlesque* in *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage*, edited by Gary D. Engle (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 71.

Will be something to see.<sup>77</sup>

Iago takes us into a world that sees blackness as “nasty” and “dirty.” His jealousy and anger come from Desdemona’s rejection of him and her choice to taint herself with the black Othello. It is the interracial relationship that incites Iago to his evil acts. While Iago’s Irish identity may be connected to his status as a legendary Shakespearean villain, his ethnicity, unlike Othello’s blackness, is not the ultimate source of ridicule in the play. With his introductory song, Iago defines an insider community of whiteness.

In Griffin’s *Othello*, the meanings of race and gender are simultaneously created. As Iago’s opening lines indicate, it is the white woman’s choice to marry the black man that is so offensive.<sup>78</sup> Desdemona is a chastised woman, responsible for dirtying the purity of whiteness with the mud of blackness. Later in the play, Desdemona is beaten by Othello and appears on stage with a black eye. The image of the black eye plays on stereotypes of black violence, while minimizing the seriousness of violence inflicted on her as a woman. The abused Desdemona is mocked for her lack of femininity, but distinguishes herself from Othello, stating

I really think Othello must be mad;

That was the hardest thump I ever had.

Just one day married, and to cut this figure –

But I’ll have satisfaction on that nigger

As sure as my name’s Desde. Oh, my head

It aches like fury, so I’ll go to bed. (business, lies down and snores)<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>78</sup> For a more extended discussion of how Desdemona functions in this plot and an excellent discussion of the larger contextual history of Ethiopian Burlesque see William J. Mahar “Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts of Blackface Minstrelsy, 1840-1890,” *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, edited by Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 189-194.

<sup>79</sup> Engle, 76.

Desdemona's reference to her figure was probably humorous to an audience watching a man. Yet while her body is mocked, her whiteness is confirmed. Her marriage has not dissolved her self-definition as a white person able to see the justice of revenge against "that nigger." At the end of the play, she emasculates Othello by challenging him: "I won't die...I say I won't; and you can't kill me."<sup>80</sup> The stage directions do not indicate that anyone does die, just that there is some "business with the pillow."<sup>81</sup> Desdemona is a woman on the margins, ridiculed for her snoring and shrewishness, but also belongs to a community of whiteness apart from her abusive black husband.

Griffin's adaptation also robs Othello of his intelligence. When Iago successfully fools Othello into believing that Cassio has gained access to Desdemona's bed, his celebration is based on an understanding of Othello's blackness. Iago tells the audience "I've given that nigger a fine nut to crack."<sup>82</sup> Othello's lamenting song that follows this line marks the first time that Othello uses a stereotypical dialect: "I wish I hadn't know a bit about it-/For a man dat's rob'd, dey sey, and don't miss what's took away,/Can very easy get along without it." He later states "I'se done everything I could day and naight to do her good."<sup>83</sup> These lines connect Othello's naivety to his blackness; this is not the noble Moor deceived by an evil Iago, but a black person whose stupidity is inherent.

Griffin's Othello is simple and naturally violent. He threatens "to tear (Desdemona) all to pieces" and "let her rip."<sup>84</sup> Later he states "That Desde is no good./ I feel like tearin' things; Oh, blood! Iago, blood!"<sup>85</sup> The violence is racialized. When discussing the murder, he employs a

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.,77.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.,74.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.,76.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.,75.

dialect for the second time in the play, stating he will “not shed her blood –but choke her wid dis pillow.”<sup>86</sup> While the violence is in Shakespeare’s script, it becomes the defining characteristic of Griffin’s *Othello*.

The short burlesque *Desdemonum*, published in 1874, similarly reinforces an idea of blackness as violent, stupid, and inferior.<sup>87</sup> Unlike Griffin’s adaptation, all of the characters speak in a minstrel dialect, justified by “Desdemonum” at the beginning of the play: “Since burnt-cork am de fashion, I’ll not be behind- / I’ll see Oteller’s wisage in his highfalutin’ mind.”<sup>88</sup> Despite this, “Oteller” is still othered in the script because of his race, referred to as “nigger” by “Iagum” and “darky” by “Brabantium.”<sup>89</sup> In one verse line, he summarizes both his stupidity and tendencies to violence: “I ain’t much on de talk, but when fightin’s round I’m dere.”<sup>90</sup> Though the script is only a little over four pages long, there are three stage directions describing Oteller’s violent behavior. Oteller “stabs himself,” draws Desdemonum “kicking, to sofa,” and “smothers her with cushions.”<sup>91</sup> The one moment of connection between Oteller and Brabantium, like Griffin’s parody, comes at the expense of the Desdemona character. Brabantium warns Oteller to “keep your eye peeled, Moor, nor cuckold be, /She’s humbugged her old daddy, and may thee.”<sup>92</sup> The play thus simultaneously outlines the dangers of femininity and blackness to reinforce a community of white masculinity.

Yet *Desdemonum* and *Othello; a Burlesque* are parodies, and even if certain audience members saw the Othello blackface character as a true depiction of the African American, the comedic spirit of the plays, and the fact Desdemona was played by a man, tempered their

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>87</sup> *Desdemonum* from *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage*, edited by Gary D. Engle (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978). The play was published in 1874, but the author is unknown.

<sup>88</sup> Engle, *Desdemonum*, 63.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 64, 65.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 65, 66.

realism. Titillating elements of Othello could be explored on the minstrel stage while the true threat of his violence and sexuality was softened. In *Desdemonum*, the death of Desdemona is followed by stage directions indicating that Othello “stabs himself and falls on Desdemonum’s body. The characters join hands and dance around them. Oteller and Desdemonum get up and join in. Tableau.”<sup>93</sup> The potentially threatening rage of Shakespeare’s play dissolves into racial farce and comical violence. In minstrelsy, Othello was seen as black, but only because white performers could undermine his nobility by indicting his character and intelligence. He was engaged in an interracial relationship, but it was not real because Desdemona was played by a man also in blackface.

In 1860, an obituary in *The New York Herald* celebrated T.D. Rice in glowing terms. “His purse and heart were always open,” it read, “and he was what might be called a thorough gentleman by instinct.”<sup>94</sup> “Daddy Rice” was “the celebrated delineator of negro character,” a pioneer of “Ethiopian minstrelsy as a specialty,” and the person who introduced “Jim Crow” to America.<sup>95</sup> The obituary lauded the “negro extravaganza” that was “exceedingly entertaining and very successful” based on “the plot of Othello.”<sup>96</sup> Rice’s *Othello* adaptation made use of fears of black amalgamation and criminality. His “Otello” sings of his wooing of Desdemona, saying that he would “tell again my story/ Ob de sprees dat I got in/ And de scrapes dat I get out/ And how often run away when lef loose/ And how dat I got free/ From de Southern Slabery/ And how often was I in de Calaboose.”<sup>97</sup> “Sprees” refers to drinking sprees and “calaboose” refers to a jail. This man is a drinker who cannot handle his freedom. He says “Black folks from sheer vexation/

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>94</sup> *New York Herald*, September 21, 1860.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in William Shakespeare, *Othello: Texts and Contexts*, Kim F. Hall, editor (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007), , 367.

Will grumbe at me a few/ And call dis ‘malgamation/ Well, I don’t care Damn if they do.’”<sup>98</sup>

Desdemona is made to be a typical woman lamenting the absent husband: “Where’s the use of getting married/ If our husbands have to roam? This thing called matrimony is not the thing crack’d up to be.”<sup>99</sup> Rice brings major racial issues to the surface in a comic light. In the minstrel show, amalgamation was given a public exploration that was playfully distinct from the violent diatribes in the papers. However, while this experimentation with racial change may reveal that there was an aspect of play and attraction to the black types being explored, the ideas generated reinforced a view of blacks as violent, stupid and belonging in slavery. This only heightened the connection of Othello’s blackness with sexuality and murder.

The minstrel potential of *Othello* did not die when formal *Othello* parody performance left the stage.<sup>100</sup> Even after minstrel adaptations of Othello were no longer popular in New York, satires of *Othello*’s themes and characters appeared in periodicals that used minstrelized dialect as a primary source of humor.<sup>101</sup> “How the tragedy was Spoiled,” for instance, presented a fictional dialogue between “Othello Jackson and Desdemona Jackson” which read “How ‘bout dat han’kercher I give yo’? I done foun’ it in dat white man Cassio’s room! Desdemona Jackson.-Lawks-a-massy! I mu’ ha’ got it mixed up wif his basket o’ washin’! Another called “A Latter Day Othello” had a black man named “Mose Johnson” bragging about his engagement to a white woman. “I s’pose yo’ knows I wuz engaged to Miss Snowflake?”<sup>102</sup> As late as 1921, the magazine *Theatre Arts Monthly* was making a joke of *Othello*’s minstrel potential. Earl Barroy rewrote a scene from Shakespeare’s *Othello* in an article called “Shakespeare up to

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>100</sup> See Shane White, *Staging Freedoms* for a description of the birth of this minstrel language, what he calls an “explosion of dialect” in New York, 185-219.

<sup>101</sup> Though significantly less frequent, versions of *Othello* minstrel shows were still present on the New York Stage in the late nineteenth century. For instance, the San Francisco Minstrels put on a burlesque of *Othello* in 1880. For a cast list, see Odell, *Annals, Volume 11*, 363-364.

<sup>102</sup> “A Later Day Othello,” *Puck*, August 5, 1896.



Date.” The Desdemona of his adaptation viciously scolds her husband: “you had better look at your own complexion. Just like a fresh shined boot...you’re a low-down, deceitful nigger.”<sup>103</sup>

The powerless Othello of this dialogue responds “Mme. Othello, you forget yourself! I am not a nigger, I am a Moor.”<sup>104</sup> A reminder that being up to date about race is constantly shifting, this adaptation brings the minstrel tradition into the twentieth century. Barroy’s Desdemona is a shrewish woman, and Othello is a self-hating and emasculated black man.

### Literary Critics

While the preceding discussion has focused on popular treatments of Othello’s blackness in New York, during the nineteenth century the growing field of literary criticism contributed distinct but ideologically complementary arguments for Othello’s black identity. While Richard Grant White and Henry Hudson denied Othello’s blackness, other literary critics accepted references in the play that identified Othello as a black man. Yet if they conceded Othello’s blackness, they did not conclude that it indicated anything positive about actual African Americans. They supported the popular culture understandings that used the black Othello to explain his jealousy, sexuality, and violence. Others used the black Othello to indict Shakespeare and the play, or as a moral lesson about amalgamation. Critics also often insisted that the black Othello was fictional. Because critics dealt with an image of Othello’s blackness that was literary and not embodied, they often wrote that the “black” Othello was necessarily imaginative and distinct from real African Americans. Through these interpretative logics, critics reconciled the black Othello with a white supremacist world view.

In the early nineteenth century the New York press carried literary articles arguing for Othello’s blackness. For some, Othello’s blackness justified the play’s plot and highlighted its

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<sup>103</sup> Earl Barroy, “Shakespeare Up to Date,” *Theatre Arts Monthly* (September 1921): 28.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

themes. Cultural assumptions about Africa fueled critique of *Othello*. In 1828, a critic from *The New York Mirror* wrote that “Othello’s love is external” and of “the gaze alone... it is in the moments of jealousy, in the alternate fits of tenderness and rage...that the soul of the African can best be judged.”<sup>105</sup> Unlike the white European, Othello’s “crime...ultimately springs from that erroneous appreciation of the female sex, which marks his country as barbarian.” Othello’s jealousy and heightened sexuality were justified as the natural traits of blackness; performing those negative actions defined Othello as a black character. The danger of Othello’s blackness is later constructed through the fragility of womanhood. Desdemona is helpless, he writes, arguing that the play’s tragedy is heightened by the fact that Othello’s “victim is...the most excellent of her sex, whose slightest suffering would give us pain.” Disagreeing with legendary Shakespeare scholar Ben Johnson, he argued of Othello: “we cannot call him magnanimous...the tranquil sage can feel compassion only for such a specimen of his race, the victim of his countries errors.” This Othello was not a vessel for the themes of a universal humanity, but a specimen who confirmed the traits of blackness.

Other critics similarly used Othello’s blackness to explain the natural flaws of the character. In *The Spirit of the Times* in 1837, for instance, Othello was linked to blackness and the new science of race: “Shakespeare was a good anatomist, and therefore made the African the easy dupe of the designing, crafty Iago, and gave him a corporeal and physical development suited to his nature, not the finesse and subtlety of a highly wrought intellect, which would have been utterly misplaced.”<sup>106</sup> This language again enlists a scientifically-motivated Shakespeare in an effort to reinforce the inferiority of blackness and argued that because Othello was naturally

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<sup>105</sup> *The New York Mirror*, November 1, 1828

<sup>106</sup> *Spirit of the Times*, September 23, 1837. Quoted in Kahn, 43, 44.

less intelligent as a black man, it makes sense that he would believe Iago.<sup>107</sup> Shakespeare was not the universal playwright of human nature, but an “anatomist.” Othello’s blackness changed the meaning of the play and the justification of the plot. In each of these examples, Othello’s negative actions -being duped, violent, and overly sexual- was associated with his race. To perform these behaviors was to perform blackness.

Some critics who accepted the black Othello argued that it made *Othello* a lesser play. *The New York Columbian* offered a racialized critique of the plausibility of the literary *Othello*:

Why this inconsistent licentious play should have kept a favorite standing on the stage for centuries, language cannot tell- history is silent on the subject. That the fair Desdemona, daughter of a Venetian senator, dissimilar in complexion, customs, and education, should be enraptured, with Othello’s narration of his bloody wars...and be induced to fly the protection of her father and become the wife of a Moor, is without a parallel in ancient or modern story, this is distorting the fair and strait lines of nature.<sup>108</sup>

For the writer, Othello was a revolting play because of the unnatural racial union. If Othello was black, Shakespeare and his play were not worth performing.

Others said that the play had value, but not to reveal universal themes, but a culturally specific message about race-mixing. If Othello was black, then the play’s meanings offered a stern warning. This was seen in John Quincy Adams’s now famous interpretation of the play: “the great moral lesson of the tragedy of ‘Othello’ is, that black and white blood cannot be intermingled in marriage without a gross outrage upon the law of Nature.”<sup>109</sup> According to

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<sup>107</sup> Othello’s unrealistic trust of Iago continues to be a critique of the play. In these arguments, however, it was a natural characteristic of his African identity. The plot simply revealed that the lack of intelligence of his race made him prone to being “duped.”

<sup>108</sup> *New York Columbian*, July 8, 1818. Reprinted from *the New-Hampshire Gazette*.

<sup>109</sup> John Quincy Adams. *New England Magazine* 9, (1835). Quoted in Peter Rawlings, editor, *Americans on Shakespeare: 1776-1914* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), 65.

Adams, Othello's blackness caused the tragedy. When Othello was depicted as black, the meaning of the play changed. Unlike the Shakespeareans who saw in the whitened Othello a tragic hero whose goodness was infected by jealousy, Adams understood *Othello* to be about whiteness being infected by blackness. *The Independent* shared a reported conversation with John Quincy Adams and a friend. The ex-President asked his companion: "do you know the moral of Othello?" The man responded: "Certainly, everyone knows the moral of Othello...why to beware of jealousy." Adams responded "no sir, you are wrong...the moral of Othello...is that a white woman must not marry a black man."<sup>110</sup> Adams's famous views on the play reached the public through newspapers such as *The Independent*, creating a contradictory and complementary discourse that warned whites of the dangers of blackness.

By the mid to late nineteenth century, critics used other logics to explain Othello's blackness. Famous Shakespearean scholar Horace Howard Furness wrote an appendix on Othello's "color" in his (still used) 1886 Variorum version of the play that highlighted the major arguments about the race of Shakespeare's Moor. The scholars Furness cited and the conclusions he drew reveal how Othello was being used to further the intellectual and cultural stranglehold that white men held on the character. Though scholars disagreed on the exact race of the character, none allowed for the possibility that African Americans had any right to claim Othello, especially on the stage.

When discussing the black Othello, writers made important distinctions between imaginative reading and theatrical embodiment. John Quincy Adams clarified the difference between reading and seeing *Othello* in his criticism of the play. On the page it gave an important moral lesson, but on the stage, Desdemona's "fondling with Othello is disgusting."<sup>111</sup> Critic

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<sup>110</sup> "A Plea for Garrets," *The Independent*, March 2, 1865.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted in Rawlings, 65.

Charles Lamb said people may cry in the theatre performance of Othello, but only because they are disgusted with his race.<sup>112</sup> Tears are shed because “a blackamoor in a fit of jealousy kills his innocent white wife.”<sup>113</sup> Lamb challenged audiences who have seen the black Othello embodied:

But on the stage, when the imagination is no longer the ruling faculty...I appeal to everyone that has seen Othello played whether he did not sink....Othello’s mind in his colour; whether he did not find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona; and whether the actual sight of the thing did not over-weigh all that beautiful compromise which we make in reading.<sup>114</sup>

In the presence of the embodied black Othello, Lamb descends from literary critic to disgusted audience member, unable to tolerate the relationship-or more precisely- “the thing.” Lamb and Adams are discussed at length in the 1886 *Variorum*, and their writings were also reprinted in the New York press. In later years the influential Shakespearean critic A.C. Bradley agreed with Lamb on the importance of the distinction between the literary and the theatrical Othello. Bradley asked if Othello “should be represented as a black in our theatres now,” and concludes “I dare say not...as Lamb observes, to imagine is one thing and to see is another.”<sup>115</sup> The discourses of Shakespearean correctness and the ideology of race came in conflict. While Shakespeare’s Othello was black, many argued, he should not be presented black on stage. Imaginative blackness was challenged by the reality of theatre. Indeed, Lamb stated that on the stage “there is just so much reality presented to our senses.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Hankey, 41.

<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Julie Hankey, 41.

<sup>114</sup> Charles Lamb, “On Lear, Othello, and Macbeth,” *New York Literary Gazette* 11 (April 13, 1839): 83.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Matteo, 253.

<sup>116</sup> Charles Lamb, “On Lear, Othello, and Macbeth,” *New York Literary Gazette* 11 (April 13, 1839): 83.

Though Furness concluded his appendix on Othello's color with his own opinion "that Shakespeare meant Othello to be black," he qualified it by identifying it as a fictional blackness. He distinguished between the literary and the theatrical to justify his reading while maintaining larger racial ideologies, arguing "its offencelessness, when I read the play, I learn from Lamb, and since actors now present the tawny hue, I am not offended when sitting at the play."<sup>117</sup> Furness implied that a black Othello would offend him in the theatre, even though his imagination did not encounter the same threat. The authority for this reading came from Shakespeare; Furness divines the subtext of *Othello*: "by way of palliation, we may therein read between the lines the public answer, wrung from the depths of vexation to that inconsequent question with which the Abolitionists of old were wont constantly to be assailed...: 'How would you want your daughter to marry a nigger.'"<sup>118</sup> The analysis of this seventeenth century work was justified with a nineteenth century ideology of race: "reading between the lines" is yet another example how race was formed through common sense assumptions.

For critic J.E. Taylor, Othello's blackness was rationalized by the freedom of artistic license. Taylor states that the many textual references to "negrezza" or blackness confirm that "Shakespeare had the outward figure of a black present in his thoughts."<sup>1</sup> He wrote, however, that "artistic truth may consist with accidental errors which lie beyond the truth of art." Othello's black nobility, he argued, violated "the physical and moral laws of nature displayed in the distinction of races."<sup>119</sup> For Taylor, like Furness, Lamb, and Bradley, Othello was black, but that did not imply that Shakespeare's hero accurately reflected the character of black Americans. The physical laws of nature made the black Othello artistically true, but realistically impossible.

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<sup>117</sup> Furness, 396.

<sup>118</sup> Quoted in Furness, 392.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Furness, 394.

For Christopher North and his friend “Talboys,” Othello’s noble blackness was the correct Shakespearean reading, but as fictional as Pegasus. Furness sampled the conversation between Talboys and North in his appendix in which they discussed blackness. North stated that “I cannot but believe that the Othello of Shakespeare is black, and all black.”<sup>120</sup> Talboys responded “wooly-headed?” North replied, “why, yes, -if you choose, -in opposition to the “curled darlings.” The affirmation of Othello’s blackness, however, remained bound to the same racial ideology of black inferiority. While they did not explain away Shakespeare’s text, they also did not think it referred to actual black Americans, but rather to an imagined literary blackness. North stated that he prefers to view Othello “as a specimen of the *Ethical Marvellous*. Like, as in another kingdom, a Winged Horse, or a Centaur,-the meeting of two natures which readily hold asunder.” If Othello was black, he was mythology-a winged horse or half-man, half-horse. In creating the noble black Othello as fiction, they reconciled Shakespeare with a white supremacist worldview.

### Conclusion

Each of the methods used by New Yorkers to make Othello’s race –the popular press, minstrelsy, the professional stage, and literary criticism- did not simply reflect mutually agreed upon racial ideologies, but helped create the meaning of blackness and whiteness in New York. Whites constructed their ownership of Othello through assumptions of Shakespearean authority, an idea that blackness was defined by the performance of negative behaviors, and by maintaining economic power over the New York theatre. The segregated institutions of New York in these years reflected the segregated meanings of whiteness and blackness in the “Othellos” living on the stage and streets of New York. He was owned and authored by white New Yorkers who reaped the benefits of his financial and cultural capital.

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<sup>120</sup>Quoted in Furness, 392.

Though critics tried to remove blackness from the legitimate Othello, the subjectivity of theatrical meanings disrupted the coherency of the racial ideology. Despite the culture of the new empirical science of human categorization, race was not objectively observable in these performances. Racial meanings were not passively internalized by the audiences because people did not agree on Othello's race.

No, Othello's race was a choice made by those who held the power to publish and perform. Actors and critics encouraged the perception that it was not a choice. They wrote that they received their racial orders directly from the genius William Shakespeare. Shakespeare told them what blacks could and could not do, and of course, he came to the same conclusions that they did. Yet, Othello's race was not received, but created. There were several competing discourses about Othello's race in New York which were not employed absolutely, but functionally. Othello was white when heroic and Shakespearean; black when criminal and sexual.

It did not stay that way. In the introduction, I stated that one guiding question of this study was to use the historical example of Othello to examine how the language that supports an ideology of whiteness can be challenged and dismantled. In the next chapter, I detail how African Americans co-opted and reframed *Othello* to argue for their humanity. It is revealing that critics were so threatened by the black embodiment of Shakespeare and the possibility that he might be a black hero. The threat exposes the efforts certain critics made to disconnect blacks from the bard, but also foreshadows an entry point for black resistance; it reveals why Robeson's performance would ultimately be so significant.



### **CHAPTER 3: THE BLACK-MADE BLACK OTHELLO**

African Americans countered white authorship of Othello's racial lessons by associating the positive qualities of the character with black identity. In chapters one and two, I argued that whites helped create a language of whiteness in New York by segregating the meanings of a white and black Othello. White critics and artists claimed Othello's story as their property through several commonly employed, often contradictory arguments. The white press normalized stage standards and published stage histories that made geniuses of white Othellos and jokes of black Shakespeareans. Critics invoked a discourse of Shakespearean correctness to argue that Shakespeare intended Othello to be white, unlike actual black people, or fictionally black. The popular press and minstrel stage depicted Othello as black when he performed criminal behavior, sexual licentiousness, and violence. Scholars argued that scientific study proved the natural inferiority of the black race (and therefore the impossibility of a noble black Othello). Theatre and performance critics therefore assumed that blacks were naturally suited to performances of humorous minstrelsy, not heroic tragedy.

In this chapter, I detail the black response to these building blocks of whiteness by arguing that African Americans made the story and character of Othello an example of black achievement. From the eighteenth century through the New Negro movement of the early twentieth century, black New Yorkers created a competing discourse that came to opposite conclusions. Black journalists argued that the study of history reveals black success in Othello and the flaws of white scholarship. Black artists and scholars insisted that Shakespeare intended to create a black hero, authorizing an ideology of racial equality. Black civil rights advocates saw black men "perform" Othello in the street when engaging in acts of intelligence and nobility; they argued that successful African Americans such as Ira Aldridge provided living evidence

against the truth of scientific racism. Finally, writers argued that black Americans could perform successfully in legitimate drama outside the minstrel tradition. By authoring black history, producing *Othello* in professional and collegiate theaters, and co-opting the authority of Shakespeare's intentions, African American New Yorkers redefined what it meant to be black, Shakespearean, and American. "Whiteness" was challenged by a black-authored *Othello*.

### Black New York

Before detailing these responses, however, it is important to historicize black resistance in New York. While it is beyond the scope of this project to detail the entire history of black New York, it is important to establish that black New Yorkers did not passively accept hostility to emancipation and black civil rights, but created institutions and traditions to challenge white supremacy.<sup>1</sup> New York was indeed a hotbed of white Southern sympathizers, race riots, violence against blacks, and de facto Jim Crow segregation; it was simultaneously a stronghold of black resistance and African identity.<sup>2</sup>

In the late eighteenth century, several institutions were created to support black life and the cause of abolitionism in New York. A small free black community created "the African Society" in 1784 to discuss how best to improve the conditions of black New Yorkers.<sup>3</sup> Their question about black uplift would later be echoed in a different form by W.E.B. Du Bois and

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<sup>1</sup> Several excellent studies have been done about the history of black New York in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Graham Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999; Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); David Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom 1777-1823* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Thelma Wills Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York* (New York: 2004); Leslie Alexander, *African or American? Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1789-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> For the seminal work on African Identity in the United States (and a fascinating discussion of Paul Robeson), see Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> See Alexander 1; Harris 82, 83.

Booker T. Washington: Do blacks gain status and improve living conditions by “moral improvement,” by convincing whites of their humanity, or by celebrating and establishing their unique African identities and background?<sup>4</sup> The African Free School ran from 1787 to 1834 in New York, offering educational opportunities to blacks such as Ira Aldridge.<sup>5</sup> The New York Manumission Society, though dominated by a paternalistic white presence, also worked to end slavery in New York, and the South. Finally, black churches became important in the black community as a safety net for poor blacks in the city.<sup>6</sup> They remained essential institutions for black New Yorkers and supporters of black-created theatre into the twentieth century.

The Emancipation Act of 1799 initiated the process of ending slavery in New York. Based on this legislation, a black person born before 1799 would remain in slavery until 1827(a date decided by another act of legislation in 1817), but those born after 1799 would no longer be slaves.<sup>7</sup> Thus, slaves were freed in New York at a glacial pace. Scholar and New York history expert Shane White calls the last years of slavery in New York a “living death.”<sup>8</sup> White challenged the perception that New York slaves, even in the early 1800s, experienced a less violent form of bondage than Southern blacks. According to court records, several incidents occurred where slaves were whipped and tortured by their owners. One particularly chilling incident involved a three year old black child being lifted into the air by his ears. Slavery was violence in New York. Even when ultimately freed, most blacks were legally disallowed from voting, entering trade guilds, and owning land. In 1826, for example, only sixteen blacks were

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander, 1, 2.

<sup>5</sup> For a description of this, see Harris 64. As Alexander convincingly demonstrates, African traditions were haunted by the specter of white violence: the gallows where blacks were executed were located next to the African Burial ground.

<sup>6</sup> See Harris, 82.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander, 3.

<sup>8</sup> White, *Staging Freedom*, 6.

legally eligible to vote in New York County.<sup>9</sup> A black New Yorker who wished to vote in the early nineteenth century actually had to “prove” his freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the inevitability of the end of slavery offered some hope to black New York, however temporary. There was a sense of possibility among African Americans as slaves were manumitted in New York; Alexander writes that over 7000 slaves were voluntarily freed from 1800-1810 alone.<sup>11</sup> Blacks became a more public presence in New York during these years, expressing their new freedom with parades which threatened white New York. African Americans also got together to socialize; the most documented example of this was William Brown’s African Grove pleasure garden, where black New York had a place to commune and discuss the future of race in the city.<sup>12</sup>

White New York responded with disgust at the increased noise in the city. Shane White writes that there was a perception that “the now free blacks were more visible,” which meant that “as slavery wound down, racial tension was rising and segregation of the city’s blacks was increasing.”<sup>13</sup> In part because of this, many white New Yorkers sought ways to relocate the black community of New York. Leslie Harris notes that this white community had an “increasing lack of faith in blacks’ abilities to live as independent free men and women in New York City.”<sup>14</sup> Whites intensified the debate about the proper role of the free black in America and the wisdom and morality of slavery. Further, slave revolts, such as the one of Denmark Vesey in Maryland,

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<sup>9</sup> Harris, 119.

<sup>10</sup> White, *Staging Freedom*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, 3. Certain slave owners saw the writing on the wall and began the inevitable emancipation

<sup>12</sup> For an interesting framing of these events, and a framing of these events as conscious displays of a subversive “whiteface minstrelsy,” see McCallister.

<sup>13</sup> White, *Staging Freedom*, 198, 165.

<sup>14</sup> Leslie Harris, 116.

offered the possibility that blacks were capable of violence and large-scale revolt against whites.<sup>15</sup>

During the antebellum years, free New York blacks formed coalitions with white abolitionists to combat Southern slavery and work toward equal rights in the North. Free blacks also had to fight Northern Democrats who believed the best course of action to the perceived race problem was to ship African Americans to Libya, to colonize them as opposed to integrating them into society. Because abolitionist priorities tended to focus on the eradication of Southern slavery and not the securing of Northern black rights, New York African Americans also broke out on their own in the 1840s in an activism that included not only middle-class, but working class black New Yorkers. Organizations such as the League of Colored Laborers fought for black rights in city, not just in terms of “moral” reform, but material well-being.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, the efforts of black New Yorkers to combat racism and organize to secure basic rights did not result in improved living conditions or political advantage. A series of events and legislative measures in the 1850s and 1860s led to violence, political disenfranchisement, and depopulation. Though no New York law forbid interracial marriage, the 1834 riots stigmatized “amalgamation” with a threat of violence. These imagined relationships (in the 1830s) and actual unions (in the five points in the 1840s) provided Democrats with ammunition to work toward ghettoizing New York’s black population. Indeed, blacks were increasingly segregated during these years, and by 1852, a full 86% of New York African Americans lived below 14<sup>th</sup> street.<sup>17</sup> This coincided with various measures that ensured a black underclass in the city: there was increasing economic poverty among black New Yorkers; the

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<sup>15</sup> White, *Staging Freedom*, 87. William Brown’s own play, *The Drama of King Shotaway* (the first black play written in America, unfortunately not extant), dramatizes one of these uprisings.

<sup>16</sup> See Leslie Harris, 170-216.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

1850 Fugitive Slave Law put all free blacks at risk of being sent South if they could not prove their freedom; the 1857 Dred Scott decision codified in U.S. law a commonly held belief that blacks were not American citizens; blacks continued to be excluded from skilled labor work; and hard fought legislative victories, such as the right to a trial for accused slaves, were overturned.<sup>18</sup>

As mentioned, this culminated in the 1863 race riots which branded whiteness on New York through horrifying violence. Eleven black men were lynched, at least one of whom was savagely and sexually mutilated. White rioters stole food and supplies from the Colored Orphan Asylum and set fire to the building; after rebuilding, it relocated to the undeveloped wasteland that was the “Harlem” of the nineteenth century. Arson and violence forced hundreds of blacks out of the city. The threat of more violence forced hundreds more to flee. It would not be until the early twentieth century that the population of black New York would surge again.

Leslie Harris’s closing thoughts on these years reflect the sense of despair and resolve that characterized the city. She writes: “Black men, women, and children compromised an integral part of New York City’s economic, political, social, and cultural life. Black New Yorkers built the city, sustained its daily existence, and gave their lives-willingly or not-for its continued prosperity. Subject to physical, cultural, and spiritual violence, black New Yorkers manifested an audacious capacity to survive, to resist repression, and to sustain a diverse community.”<sup>19</sup> I sample the events influencing in black New York not to summarize history, but thematize it in the context of this discussion. For blacks in the nineteenth century, New York was full of danger and possibility. It was a place of violent murder, segregation, Democratic Southern sympathizers, and white supremacist ideology. It was also where a demonstration of resistance could mean the most, where assertions of black selfhood, equality, and humanity cut most

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<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the reviewed events of this paragraph, see Leslie Harris, from whom I take this information, 267-271.

<sup>19</sup> Leslie Harris, 288.

deeply. This story is about the New York theatre, a microcosm of the larger battle between white violence and black freedom, which was fought in the press and on the boards.

### Early Claims to Black Shakespeare

In 1828, the first black newspaper in the U.S., New York's *Freedom's Journal*, told the story of a black anti-slavery subversive who signed his essays, "Othello." "In 1788 Othello published at Baltimore," the *Freedom's Journal* reported, "an essay against the slavery of negroes."<sup>20</sup> Othello was quoted in the journal critiquing the hypocrisy of white slaveholders: "Is not your conduct, when compared with your principles, a sacrilegious irony? When you dare to talk of civilization and the gospel, you pronounce your anathema. In you the superiority of power produces nothing but a poor inhumanity." Though we do not know the intent of the writer in giving himself the name, this black "Othello" identified himself with a politics that directly challenged white supremacy.<sup>21</sup> Though tenuously connected to Shakespeare's play, perhaps, his position is consistent with the tradition that would develop in years to come. The black-authored Othello was not an imitation of white legitimacy but an identity that enabled a challenge to white institutions.

More concrete claims to Othello were made at William Brown's African Theatre where James Hewlett directly identified himself with Shakespeare. In his collection of documents on the African Theatre, George A. Thompson rightly challenges readers to look at the history of the African Theatre as more than a simple story of white racism successfully quashing the first black theatrical experiment. Charles Mathews and Stephen Price were motivated by economic concerns as well as racial ones; the black theatre was a comedic gold mine for Mathews and a

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<sup>20</sup> "Varieties, Othello," *Freedom's Journal*, November 21, 1828.

<sup>21</sup> For more information on specific black Shakespeareans outside of New York, see Errol Hill's, *Shakespeare in Sable*.

threat to Price's box office earnings. Further, the black actors did not silently accept the verdict of their white mockers. In fact, James Hewlett fought hard to assert his right to Shakespeare.

Several newspapers called Hewlett "The African Roscius," but that is not how he referred to himself. Hewlett called himself "Shakespeare's Proud Representative." Hewlett was often referred to in the New York press with this moniker, and he believed it. When he received word that Mathews was mocking his acting of Shakespeare, he wrote a long letter to *The National Advocate*, in which he confronted Mathews directly:

You have, I perceive by the programme of your performance, ridiculed our African Theatre in Mercer Street, and burlesqued me with the rest of the negroe actors, as you are pleased to call us-mimicked our styles-imitated our dialects-laughed at our anomalies-and lampooned, O shame, even our complexions. Was this well for a brother actor? Why these reflections on our color, my dear Matthews, so unworthy your genius and humanity, your justice and generosity?<sup>22</sup>

Hewlett challenged him as a fellow human being, as a "brother actor." This "Proud Representative" then made clear his claim to Shakespeare:

Our immortal bard says, (and he is our bard, as well as yours, for we are all descendants of the Plantagenets, the white and red rose;) our bard Shakespeare makes sweet Desdemona say, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind." Now, when you were ridiculing the 'chiefe black tragedian,' and burlesquing the 'real negro melody,' was it my 'mind,' or my visage' which should have made an impression upon you? Again, my dear Matthews, our favorite bard makes Othello, certainly an interesting character, speak thus:

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<sup>22</sup> Letter, *The National Advocate*, May 8, 1824.



‘Haply, for I am black.’ That is as much as to say, ‘tis happy that I am black. Here then we see a General proud of his complexion.<sup>23</sup>

That “haply” is usually understood to mean “by chance” in this context does not negate the clear individual connection Hewlett makes to Shakespeare and Othello. Hewlett co-opted the tropes of Shakespearean correctness by arguing that Shakespeare meant Othello to be a black man. “Shakespeare’s Proud Representative” redefined the Shakespearean as a concept inclusive of, and defined by blackness; Hewlett created Shakespeare as a man who understood the equality of the races, as someone capable of looking past complexions to see the “visage” in the mind. Othello’s Shakespearean blackness thus became an argument that African-Americans were capable of the kind of success (as a “General”) that Othello displayed in Shakespeare’s play. Further, Othello’s blackness was a source of pride. Othello is “proud of his complexion.” By using Shakespeare’s language with Mathews and advertising it in the *National Advocate*, Hewlett announced authorship of true Shakespearean meanings to a white public.

This challenge was not received seriously by *National Advocate* editor Mordecai Noah, who mocked Hewlett’s rant against Mathews. As discussed, like many black New Yorkers, Hewlett later appeared several times in the New York crime blotter. In one such instance over a decade later, however, Hewlett did not display any loss of his resolve or conviction that he was “Shakespeare’s Proud Representative.” In 1834, the *New York Commercial Advertiser* narrated a discussion between a magistrate and “Hewlett, the ‘African Roscius’” who had to answer for robbing several items from the a ship. Hewlett saw himself as Othello to the last, asking:

Do you-can you believe me guilty of the crime with which I am charged.

Magistrate.- Do you want my opinion?

Hewlett.- Yes, sir, I do.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Magistrate.-Well, then, I have no doubt of it.

Hewlett.-Then is Othello's occupation gone.<sup>24</sup>

Hewlett also responded with Othello's line "I lay my soul at stake" to resist the accusations of his crimes. In identifying himself with the character he defined the black Othello as a critique of white justice.

New York's most famous black Othello, of course, never played the role in the city. Ira Aldridge was with the African Theatre long enough to be physically assaulted, but not long to establish a name for himself in the New York theatre community. The legend of Aldridge, however, reached New York nonetheless from various countries on the European continent. In 1833 a production of *Othello* was advertised in Leeds, England starring Aldridge as "the African Roscius." The playbill, housed at The New York Public Library Performing Arts archive, makes no mention of his name.<sup>25</sup> Aldridge was simply the "African Roscius." He was a heroic novelty act with an incredible back story which was circulated in New York through the *New York Courier*, which printed:

The ancestors of the African Roscius, down to the Grandfather of the subject of this memoir, were Princes of the Foulah Tribes, whose dominions were Senegal, on the banks of the river Gambia. The father of the present individual was sent for his education to Salmectady College, near New York, in the United States. Three days after his departure from his native shore, an insurrection broke out among the Tribe, and the King (the Grandfather of the African Roscius) fell a victim to his mutinous subjects. Deprived of the means of asserting his birthright, and to a certain degree, cast on the world as a cosmopolite, his father became a Minister of the Presbyterian persuasion, and now

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 197.

<sup>25</sup> Othello playbill, September 20, 1833, Hiram Steed Collection, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

officiates in Zion Chapel, New York. The subject of this memoir, born July 24, 1807, was destined from the same profession, but preferring the sock and buskin, he departed from his Father's roof and wended his way to the shores of Old England.<sup>26</sup>

The legend of Aldridge provided a counterpoint to white American Shakespeareans. It was revised by black Americans to challenge the white status quo. Edwin Forrest had a black contemporary, a native New Yorker, who would never perform opposite him because of his race. For black New York, Aldridge's European success became an indictment of American race relations. His existence revealed that it was not that African Americans were incapable of performing Shakespeare, but that a racist America was incapable of accepting their talents. As Aldridge toured Europe his story was written about in mainstream and African American publications in New York. By playing Othello in Europe with reported artistic genius, Aldridge became living evidence against the truth of a biological racial hierarchy. Black writers and artists would also argue that Aldridge's Othello was the true Othello Shakespeare intended.<sup>27</sup> Blacks claimed Shakespeare through Aldridge, and they did not simply state that it was possible for a black man to play Othello. They said he did it better.

The story of Aldridge challenged whiteness by co-opting Shakespeare's authority and re-writing white history. In an 1854 edition of the *Frederick Douglass Paper*, for example, an article entitled "The Origin, History and Hopes of the Negro Race" had the following comment about Aldridge: "in the histrionic art there is Ira Aldridge, and those who have seen him say that in the performance of Othello, Mr. Aldridge has no superior even in Charles Kean."<sup>28</sup> At the same time that whites were linking Othello, blackness, and criminality in the popular press and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., quoting the *New York Courier*. For descriptions of Aldridge's life, see Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*. Carbondale (Southern Illinois University Press, 1968).

<sup>27</sup> The Schomburg archive of African American history at the New York Public Library in Harlem has many playbills from Aldridge's European performances.

<sup>28</sup> "Origin, History and Hopes of the Negro Race," *Frederick Douglass Paper*, January 27, 1854.

further distancing the legitimate Shakespearean performance from them, African Americans were creating their own history of the proper embodiment of Shakespeare's Moor. This article participated in the stage comparisons that white Shakespearean critics valued so highly, but came to the conclusion that it was not Charles Kean, but the black Ira Aldridge who was the most successful. As the title of the article indicated, the claim to artistic achievement in this Shakespearean role was so significant that it was part of the "Hopes of the Negro Race." This was not the only time that Douglass connected Othello to contemporary racial concerns. In "Colorphobia in New York," Douglass quoted the play as a critique of the fear displayed by whites when they were physically near African Americans.<sup>29</sup> The play became a site for satire and ridicule of white "colorphobia."

Shane White persuasively argues that elements of the Ira Aldridge myth, largely created by Aldridge himself, are false and tantamount to identity fraud of James Hewlett.<sup>30</sup> White restores Hewlett to the historical narrative as the man who showed Charles Matthews the African Theatre, and who was the true star of the major performances. However, this necessary revision does not negate the importance that the Aldridge story came to have among African Americans. Aldridge and his performance of Othello were in themselves an argument against slavery and the truth of scientific racism. If a black man could achieve the brilliant success that Aldridge enjoyed abroad, then it was not an inherent biological deficiency that defined blacks and justified their enslavement, but a uniquely American environment that unjustly degraded a capable group of people, preventing them from achieving success.

In the black press, Ira Aldridge and his performance of Othello challenged white stage standards. *The National Era* reported on a St. Petersburg performance in which Aldridge played

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<sup>29</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Colorphobia in New York," *The North Star*, May 25, 1849. For an excellent discussion of this, and more extensive quotation see Gary Taylor, *Buying Whiteness*, n 18, pg. 365.

<sup>30</sup> White, *Stories of Freedom*, 127-184.

Othello with German-speaking actors. Writing that “the success of the negro actor, Ira Aldridge, has been wonderful,” *The National Era* reviewer quoted a St. Petersburg paper that lauded the effort: “the African artist completely captivated his audience by his harmonious and resonant voice, and by a style full of simplicity, nature, and dignity.”<sup>31</sup> Aldridge achieved this in the midst of skepticism, as “at his debut, people were curious to see an Othello who needed neither crape or pomade to blacken his face.”<sup>32</sup> The Russian journalist, unlike white New York, was able to get beyond race to see Aldridge’s talent and dignity. *The National Era* had reported on an earlier performance in Surrey in which Aldridge’s “reception throughout the performance was flattering... Mr. Aldridge possesses an excellent voice, commanding figure, and expressive countenance, to which he adds the advantages of education and study.”<sup>33</sup> The physical descriptions of Aldridge echo the descriptions of the legitimate white Othellos from the first chapter, but describe the black Aldridge- a physically expressive, commanding, and well-educated actor- as the successful Othello. The critics used the language of the white stage to argue that the black Aldridge most effectively embodied Shakespeare’s Moor.

In 1863, well-known black activist and playwright William Wells Brown wrote in his book *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* that Aldridge “seemed to me the best Othello that I had ever seen...the audience with one impulse rose to its feet amid the wildest enthusiasm. Othello was called before the curtain and received the applause of the delighted multitude.”<sup>34</sup> The superlative “best,” implies a comparison to Forrest and Edwin Booth who were typically called the best Othellos in the white press at the time. Among black Americans, Aldridge was seen to be not only capable, but better than the white Othello.

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<sup>31</sup> *National Era*, April 28, 1859..

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *The National Era*, June 8, 1848.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Martin Hoyles’s, *Ira Aldridge: Celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> Century Actor* (London: Hansib, 2008), 30.

Interestingly, Brown chose to say that “Othello,” and not Aldridge was “called before the curtain.” Ira Aldridge the man came to embody in legend the dignity associated with Othello the character. Performing the black Othello was to perform the nobility and intelligence that Aldridge displayed in his life.

It would be a mistake to overstate the significance and wide-reaching effect of these early examples of black Shakespearean resistance. These stories, though significant, are gleaned from many years of publication. At this point, black Shakespeare provided meaningful momentary anecdotes about the capacity of black Americans, but was in no sense a conscious movement to challenge white traditions. It was in the twentieth century that black New Yorkers would consciously reframe Aldridge and black Shakespeare into a more coherent attack on the norms of the white stage.

#### Ira Aldridge and the White Press

White abolitionists explicitly politicized the implications that Aldridge’s international success had on the state of American race relations. William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* indicated that Aldridge, “renowned negro tragedian,” was one of several black Americans who “disprove the inherent lack of capacity in black America.”<sup>35</sup> In another edition of *The Liberator*, Aldridge’s success and “most excellent representation of Othello” are used as evidence that “European nations do not seem to entertain these prejudices by any means so deeply as we do here in the United States.”<sup>36</sup> *The Independent* made a similar argument: “every colored person who achieves anything noticeable in the intellectual world, by that very deed assaults the main fort which defends the castle of slavery. A colored artist like Ira Aldridge, whose acting has become famous in all the courts of Europe; a colored orator like Frederick Douglass-nay, every

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<sup>35</sup> “The Colored People of the Northern States,” *Liberator*, November 29, 1861.

<sup>36</sup> “Prejudice of Race and Color” *Liberator*, June 26, 1857.

gentlemanly, well-educated colored man, in his sphere, is an argument in the face of pro-slavery politicians.”<sup>37</sup> The narrative of Ira Aldridge was celebrated by white abolitionists who asserted that Aldridge was evidence of the potential of the African race. His existence revealed the faulty racial assumptions held by southern slaveholders who argued that slavery was a benevolent form of existence for an inferior race incapable of dealing with their own freedom.

Favorable, if less overtly political references to Ira Aldridge also appeared in the mainstream white press. Aldridge’s success was discussed in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, *The Weekly Herald*, *The New York Herald*, and *the Brooklyn Eagle*.<sup>38</sup> Though they did not argue that Aldridge was an example of black progress, they illustrate that his narrative was made available to the New York public, and at least offered the possibility that blacks could achieve success in the role. It is important to note, however, that these descriptions had a different context than the celebrations of Aldridge in the abolitionist and black press. In the *New York Herald*, for instance, Aldridge’s Othello was described as receiving “terms of high commendation.”<sup>39</sup> In the column right next to this notice was an advertisement for “a celebrated band of Ethiopians” known as the George and Christy Minstrels who “tender a fresh assortment of songs.” The popularity and specter of minstrelsy was never far away from discussions of *Othello*. It is important to contextualize Aldridge’s success with the larger reality that blackness was predominantly theatricalized by minstrel productions throughout the nineteenth century.

Further, the abolitionist support of black Shakespeare exhibited strands of romantic racialism. Certain white journalists who supported the notion that Shakespearean meanings

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<sup>37</sup> “Our Special Contributors” *The Independent*, September 30, 1858.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance: “Arrival of the Pacific and Arabia Seven Days Later from Europe” *The Weekly Herald*, April 23, 1853; “Gossip of the World England” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, February 5, 1859; “Art, Literature, Music and the Drama Abroad” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, September 14, 1861; *The Brooklyn Eagle*, February 9 1853, .

<sup>39</sup> *The New York Herald* , August 9, 1857.

should be inclusive of the black community were still influenced by scientific racial thinking. The road to reframing black Shakespeare was thus challenged by the overt racism of the white press, while it was complicated by seemingly sympathetic whites. In the *Independent*, for instance, blacks were complimented as having a “natural aptitude...for civilization and improvement.”<sup>40</sup> An ostensibly positive piece on “The Negro as Artist” in an 1866 issue of *The Radical* celebrated another black Othello, Morgan Smith.<sup>41</sup> Moncure D. Conway wrote that “many years of familiar knowledge of negroes has convinced me that they are born orators, painters, sculptors, musicians, actors, though for the present dwarfed by the spell of the wicked magician Oppression.”<sup>42</sup> By identifying an entire race as “born” with certain aptitudes, even positive ones, Conway reinforced the notion that race determined what was possible in life. One of the romanticized elements of black artists that would later be invoked to describe Paul Robeson was that they were natural actors not in need of (or capable of receiving) training. Conway wrote that “not a single tragedian in this hemisphere...is attracting so much attention as the negro actor Ira Aldridge,” whom he argued, “I have from good authority, is one who never had any training as an actor.” Though the idea of what the “inherent” qualities of blackness are different in this review, the celebration of Smith and Aldridge nevertheless are based on the idea that there is an inherent difference between blacks and whites that cannot be overcome.

Romantic racialism was dangerous because the flipside of the ideology- a belief that blacks are naturally, essentially, and scientifically a lesser race- could be employed to explain away Aldridge’s accomplishments. In the *Journal of Phrenology*, just months after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, an article distinguished different kinds of Africans, identifying

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> For descriptions of Smith, see Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*.

<sup>42</sup> Moncure D. Conway, “The Negro as Artist,” *The Radical*, September 1866.



Aldridge as one of the more advanced. I quote it at length to illustrate the racial logic of the quote and the description of Aldridge's stage performance:

That there are marked phrenological and physiological differences between the white and the black races is susceptible of positive proof...they do differ so essentially in form, temperament, quality, capability, and disposition as to be readily classified without reference to their color; nor can the two races unite, by amalgamation, so as to perpetuate the mongrel or mulatto...there is nothing in Phrenology or Physiology that can justify the depriving of any human being of his inherent rights. The child, however, must always be subservient to his parent, and the weak in body or mind to the strong, as man is subservient to God.<sup>43</sup>

He then quoted the *Atlantic Monthly*, which specifically invoked Aldridge's name: "the physical characteristics of all these people, their capacity for labor, their religious tendencies and inventive skill, their temperaments and diets, might be constructed into a sliding scale, starting with a Mandingo, or a Foulah, such as Ira Aldridge, and running to earth at length in a Papel...Burmeister, who saw Ira Aldridge, the Foulah actor, play in Macbeth, Othello, and his other famous parts, saw nothing negro about him, except the length of his arm, the shrillness of his voice in excitement, the terrible animalism of the murder-scenes, and his tendency to exaggerate...his whole physiognomy, in spite of his beard, was completely negro-like."

Aldridge's achievement was biologically explainable because his blood represented the best of the African people. Yet his story could not be universalized to offer hope to all blacks. Aldridge was successful because he was less black, because he was high-functioning; he was the most white of the Africans. It was only because of this that he was capable of performing the white Shakespeare. One of the striking features of this reasoning is how unscientific much of it is.

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<sup>43</sup> "Negro Ethnology," *American Phrenological Journal* (April 1863): 79.

While it relies on looking at certain physical characteristics, its logic depends on an understanding that race is defined by the performance of certain behaviors. It is Aldridge's performance in the murder-scenes and his "tendency to exaggerate" that mark him as black. Aldridge became black when acting with animalistic violence.

### The New Negro Movement and the Black Othello

The scientific classification of Aldridge revealed the degree to which white identity depended on the distinction from black identity. Race could determine outcomes by preordaining what was possible for a person living in America. The ideology of whiteness and the theatrical events of the nineteenth century provided significant obstacles against which black theatre artists of the twentieth century had to fight. Black Shakespeare, and indeed, black theatre in general, was violently quashed on the stages of New York in the 1820s. At the turn of the century, there was little tradition of black Shakespearean performance and no black owned theater building in New York.<sup>44</sup> Minstrelsy grew into the most popular and lucrative form of theatre in the city. Talented blacks capable of making a living in the theatre often had to perform black-face distortions of white-authored characters.

But New York was transformed in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The ideology of race that insisted on blacks' biological inability to change was met by radical changes in black demographics. The black population in New York grew exponentially as the black exodus after the 1863 riots became a Great Migration at the turn of the century. The Harlem neighborhood alone housed "50,000 black residents in 1914 and nearly 165,000 by 1930."<sup>45</sup> "Black New Yorkers" became a larger and more diverse population in the early

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<sup>44</sup> There were, however, examples of blacks performing in theatre. See Hill, *History of African American Theatre* for examples.

<sup>45</sup> Marcy S. Sacks, *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City Before World War I* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1. It would be easy to overstate this population growth in terms of the city,

twentieth century. They came to New York for a variety of reasons, including the promise of economic prosperity and the escape of Southern violence. They met a de facto Jim Crow racism, however, that continued to manifest itself in violent racially-motivated riots.<sup>46</sup> Early in the century New York held more transplanted than native blacks in the city, and the locals were not always sympathetic to the migrating southerners.<sup>47</sup>

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, this diverse group of New Yorkers created institutions, artistic expressions, and printed publications to advance their civil rights, articulate African American identity, and challenge the status quo of white New York. Periodicals such as *The New York Amsterdam News*, *The New York Age*, *Crisis*, the Urban League's organ *Opportunity*, and the *Journal of Negro History* focused on issues neglected by the white press. Though *The New York Amsterdam News* would describe the need to fight for the "race," people disagreed on what form that fight should take and what the meanings of the "race" consisted of.<sup>48</sup> The early editions of the *New York Age* sold the ideas and philosophy of Booker T. Washington, which advocated a very different kind of progress than that envisioned by W.E.B. Du Bois in his essays in *The Crisis*. The "Harlem Renaissance" or "New Negro movement" of the North was an all-encompassing rethinking of the meanings of race with various strands of disagreement.<sup>49</sup>

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however. In Charles Green and Basil Wilson, *The Struggle for Black Empowerment in New York City: Beyond the Politics of Pigmentation* (New York: Praeger Publisher's 1989), for instance, they note that blacks made up only 2% of the population in 1900 and 5% by 1930, 5.

<sup>46</sup> For instance, riots broke out in 1900, 1905, and after Jack Johnson's victory over "the great white hope" in 1910.

<sup>47</sup> Green and Wilson, 9.

<sup>48</sup> And publications varied in their quality and sensationalism. James Baldwin, for instance, had a particularly harsh view of the *New York Amsterdam News*. In *Notes of a Native Son*, he wrote: "the best-selling Negro newspaper, I believe, is the *Amsterdam Star-News*, which is also the worst, being gleefully devoted to murders, rapes, raids n love-nests, inter-racial wars, any item-however meaningless-concerning prominent Negroes;" James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, revised edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 60.

<sup>49</sup> "Harlem Renaissance" is an anachronistic term, but one that is nonetheless frequently used to describe a variety of artistic output in New York from 1910 to WWII. For a discussion on this, see George Hutchinson, *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Introduction, 1-3. Also

The popular perception in white America at the turn of the century was that blacks were useful humorous entertainers, but incapable of serious acting. Challenging the stereotypes of minstrelsy became a major effort of the movement as “black artists of the new negro renaissance sought cultural legitimacy.”<sup>50</sup> Minstrelsy had proven that black stereotype was lucrative business, and by the 1890s, African Americans such as Bert Williams were making a good living through comedic stereotype.<sup>51</sup> In his landmark study of black Shakespeareans, Errol Hill addressed the realities of this situation:

In 1867 the only roles available to black performers were on the minstrel stage. Interracial casting was nonexistent, and there were no black companies with which he (Aldridge) could work. A decade and more would pass before the first black actor appeared as the lowly Uncle Tom in the universally popular dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel.<sup>52</sup>

Hill identifies one of the major issues facing blacks in the theatre at this time: How do you transcend the comic view of minstrelsy that, in the eyes of many, was an accurate depiction of African-Americans?<sup>53</sup>

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consult David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2002), 1-16.

<sup>50</sup>Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> This in itself is a source of much debate with regard to the “progress” these representations advanced for black Americans. Was the stereotype inherently harmful, or was the respect gained by Walker and Williams an example of mainstream acceptance of certain black Americans, who also were able to gain economic independence? For a discussion of these issues see Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre 1895-1910*. David Krasner details the ways in which the years from 1895-1910 also contain examples of “resistance and parody” with regard to predominant black images. For instance, Krasner writes, “amidst deteriorating race relations between 1895 and 1910, African American theatre found itself caught between two competing forces: the demands to conform to white notions of black inferiority, and the desire to resist these demands by undermining and destabilizing entrenched stereotypes of blacks onstage,” 1.

<sup>52</sup> Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 27.

<sup>53</sup> Many whites mistook minstrel performers for actual black people, and others saw the minstrel depictions as authentic expressions of blackness. Anti-slavery pioneer Horace Greeley wrote “it is...beyond doubt that it (minstrelsy) expresses the peculiar characteristics of the negro as truly as the great masters of Italy represent their more spiritual and profound nationality.” Minstrelsy did not simply satirize through unrealistic farce, but helped form normative racial and gender identities through the expressions of the white body.

The New Negro movement used Shakespeare and Othello to reframe meanings of race. By authoring black history, claiming Shakespeare's authority, performing productions of Othello, challenging minstrelsy, and linking dignity with the performance of blackness, these artists and writers challenged Shakespearean whiteness. Othello became black because black Americans came to author his meanings and claim ownership of the cultural capital he provided.

### Black History

In his work *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "one fact and one alone explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction; they cannot conceive of Negroes as men; in their minds the word "negro" connotes 'inferiority and "stupidity" lightened only by unreasoning gaiety and humor."<sup>54</sup> As the best historian of his (and perhaps any) era, Du Bois effectively deconstructs for the contemporary reader the assumptions of white historians of the early twentieth century. As a black historian of the early twentieth century, Du Bois also evidences a major effort occurring in black America at the time. One element of black resistance in the New Negro movement was to revise white historical narratives and restore black stories to American history.

African Americans wrote political history that aimed to change the meanings of race in the present by revising narratives of the past. Respected black progressive Kelly Miller wrote that history had a role in solving the "race problem," which required "time to study it."<sup>55</sup> Miller argued that "the Negro must learn to know his own story and to love it," and that in most histories, "the tendency is always to glorify the white man and to debase the Negro. The effect

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<sup>54</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 726. In a discussion of "drama," it is perhaps appropriate to indicate what Du Bois called the greatest drama: "the most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell... It was a tragedy that beggared the Greek."

<sup>55</sup> Kelly Miller, "Negro History," *Opportunity*, (March 1926): 85.

upon the spirit of the Negro is deplorably oppressive.”<sup>56</sup> The writing of history became a tool of social uplift. Miller framed black history through theatrical metaphor: “Dr. Woodson is concerned in digging out every significant role which the Negro has played in the American drama. This makes American history, not only full and complete, but true to the actualities of historical happenings.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, black Americans were rarely cast in positive roles in white-authored history. Many, including Du Bois himself, focused on these omissions of black stories from the mainstream historical narrative. To remedy this, Carter G. Woodson and John E. Bruce co-founded a quarterly publication called *The Journal of Negro History* in 1916 to begin the process of re-thinking.<sup>58</sup> In his essay, Miller celebrated Woodson for becoming “the first member of his race to receive complete university training and equipment for scientific historical inquiry.”<sup>59</sup> In New York, black historian Arthur Schomburg archived a collection of African American historical documents and artifacts. Schomburg further legitimized the study of black history by collecting manuscripts and books on black culture and selling it to the New York Public Library “during the peak of the renaissance.”<sup>60</sup> The study of black history was important to reframing the meanings of race in the New Negro movement because it helped expose the flawed scholarship of white historians, celebrate the achievements of black Americans, and professionalize black intellectuals.

While many aspects of the black experience were detailed by historians, black achievement in the theatre received particular attention, even in the popular press. *The New York Amsterdam News*, among many black newspapers, rediscovered the history of the African

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> In the following chapter, we will see examples from *The Journal of Negro History* which use the history of *Othello* to revise white history and expand black history.

<sup>59</sup> Miller, “Negro History,” 85.

<sup>60</sup> Hutchinson, 3.

Theatre and publicized it in such essays as “First Negro theatre Here in 1821, Says Newspaper.”<sup>61</sup> Another discussed Ira Aldridge, headlining, “Our Stage History, Almost Forgotten, is Well Worth Knowing and Being Proud of.”<sup>62</sup> This short essay repeated the anecdote about the black actors from the African Theatre being released from jail “upon a promise never to act Shakespearean drama,” again positioning the history of black Shakespeare in opposition to mainstream white racism. Ira Aldridge and his Othello were popular subjects of historical review because they provided an example of black achievement in the highly regarded Shakespeare performance. J. Mercer Burrell wrote about Aldridge in “The Negro in the Drama” in *The New York Amsterdam News*, stating that “the first Negro actor who attempted serious drama was Ira Aldridge,” who “went to England, where he appeared as a star in Shakespearean productions, his best performance being as Othello.”<sup>63</sup> Aldridge was often depicted as a successful “star” abroad, an example of black achievement, and a living indictment of white racism. The popular history of Aldridge was reinforced by official archival efforts, which were made known to black New York. Aldridge was commemorated at “the 135<sup>th</sup> street branch of the New York Public Library,” where there “is a very interesting collection of programs and press comments on the performances of Aldridge.”<sup>64</sup> NAACP secretary James Weldon Johnson celebrated Aldridge’s Othello in his book *Black Manhattan*, writing that Aldridge “opened in Othello” in Europe and “was a sensation.”<sup>65</sup> Johnson also had a campaign to honor Aldridge in England through donations in New York. One headline in *The New York Amsterdam News*, for

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<sup>61</sup> “First Negro Theatre Here in 1821, Says Newspaper” *The New York Amsterdam News*, June, 12, 1929.

<sup>62</sup> “Our Stage History, Almost Forgotten, is well worth Knowing and Being Proud of,” *Chicago Defender, National Edition*, August 10, 1929.

<sup>63</sup> J. Mercer Burrell, “The Negro in the Drama,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, March 7, 1928.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> James Weldon Johnson. *Black Manhattan*, 85.

instance, encouraged readers to “Donate \$1000 for Aldridge Chair.”<sup>66</sup> Johnson wanted the accomplishments of the black New Yorker Aldridge to be memorialized in the commemorative chair at the location of Shakespeare’s birth and youth. This concrete expression of Aldridge’s achievement revealed the depth of the historical challenge and desired permanency to changes in white history.

Black historians challenged white stage history by participating in the discourse of actor comparison that had made stars of white Othellos. Many argued that Aldridge was the best Othello of his era, more widely regarded than Edmund Kean and Edwin Forrest. An essay from *The New York Amsterdam* news mentioned that Aldridge was not only a good example of his “race,” but that from “1833 to 1867 he was considered the greatest Othello.”<sup>67</sup> Even “Kean recognized his ability,” the writer argued. Another essay, entitled “New Trend of Negro Art Seen by Writer,” wrote similarly that “the Negro on the stage is nothing new. One of the strongest rivals of the great Edmund Kean and the famous elder Booth was Ira Frederick Aldridge, a tragedian known as “‘the African Roscius.’ Aldridge appeared in Belfast as Othello, with Kean as Iago, and Kean praised him highly.”<sup>68</sup> By invoking the name of Edmund Kean and Booth, and calling Aldridge one their “strongest rivals,” the writers placed Aldridge in the tradition of white history, legitimizing him as one of the great Othellos. A 1925 issue of *Opportunity* had a feature story on Ira Aldridge, celebrating him and his Othello with numerous heroic pictures copied from the Schomburg collection.<sup>69</sup> The author wrote that during his era Ira Aldridge

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<sup>66</sup> “Donate \$1000 for Aldridge Chair” *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 31, 1929. The fund was referred to for a couple of years in the papers, for instance, on August 7, 1929 in *The New York Amsterdam News*, another article entitled “Contribute to Aldridge Fund” noted that Aldridge was the “African Roscius”, and detailed his success, particularly in *Othello*.

<sup>67</sup> *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 22, 1927.

<sup>68</sup> “New Trend of Negro Art Seen by Writer,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, January 25, 1928.

<sup>69</sup> “Ira Aldridge,” *Opportunity*, (March 1925): 88.



“overshadowed every other interpreter of Othello.”<sup>70</sup> Historians rewrote comparative stage histories by coming to opposite conclusions than the white press about who most ably performed Othello in the nineteenth century. The history of Aldridge and the black Othello were ideological weapons used to show the capacity of blacks and the legitimacy of their artistic creations.

The challenge to mistaken white history could be bold, direct, and well-publicized. Restoring Aldridge to the historical narrative was a way of celebrating black genius while publicly advertising the omissions of white scholarship. In 1929, *The New York Times* wrote that Paul Robeson was going to play Othello in London, and that “probably for the first time the Moor will be played by an actor who will need no artificial darkening of the skin.”<sup>71</sup> James Weldon Johnson, whose mission it was to restore Ira Aldridge to history, respectfully chided the *New York Times*:

A special cable to the *Times* from London reports that Paul Robeson has been cast to play the part of Othello and adds that this is “probably” the first time this role will be played by a negro. I am sure you will wish to correct this error, inasmuch as a group of American negroes recently subscribed \$1000 to endow a memorial chair in the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-on-Avon to Ira Aldridge, the celebrated negro tragedian, who played Othello in the early half of the nineteenth century. Aldridge achieved a pronounced success in London and on the Continent in Othello and other parts, playing Othello to the Iago of Edmund Kean, who admire him greatly, James S. Weldon Johnson, Secretary, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> “Robeson to Play Othello,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 1929.

<sup>72</sup> “Children’s Laughter,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1929.

Johnson's venue for correcting white history was the well-read *New York Times*, which reached thousands of New Yorkers. The challenge to history was not an isolated effort of the black community, but one that reached into mainstream white press. By once again invoking the revered name of Edmund Kean, Johnson used the history of great white tragedians to legitimize the achievements of Aldridge. Finally, Johnson's revision held an inherent critique of American race relations by identifying European countries that celebrated his black Othello.

It was this particular aspect of the historical black Othello- his ability to highlight differences between enlightened European and backward American views on race- that politicized Aldridge in the present. In black periodicals, many challenged the humorous minstrel depiction of blackness by showing the history of the serious black tragedian. In an essay in *Opportunity*, entitled "Othello Again," the author insists that "the real tragedy of Othello has been the attitude of America toward it. Art or no art, genius or no genius, our American audiences have been loath to accept a representation of a Negro, call him a Moor or what not, speaking through the immaculate style of Shakespeare, and to a white woman."<sup>73</sup> Shakespeare had status in white America, and therefore having capable blacks speaking his "immaculate" language was a direct challenge to a belief system, one that depended on the perceived need to separate white women from black men. In the essay, Ira Aldridge represented the possible: "there is, in fact an eminent precedent for casting a Negro in the role of Othello in Ira Aldridge, who became known internationally as the greatest interpreter of this difficult role. Dark, talented, he needed no illusion of a "shadowed livery of the burnished sun. His abilities won a praise of American and European critics, and a list of his patrons reads like a catalog of European royalty." The history of Aldridge helped redefine the "Shakespearean" as inclusive of blackness. Aldridge was in fact the "greatest" of the Shakespeareans. J.A. Rogers interpreted this history as

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<sup>73</sup> "Othello Again," *Opportunity* (February 1925): 36.

giving hope to blacks living in the U.S at the time: “What Ira Aldridge did can be done again. At a time when slavery was at its worst in America, Aldridge was playing Othello, he being the only Negro in the company.”<sup>74</sup> The story of Aldridge offered possibility that race relations could and should be different. An article in the national *Chicago Defender* had the title “Protest over O’Neill’s Play Recalls Day of Ira Aldridge,” with the lead-in that “famous Black Tragedian Played Opposite White Women in Many Plays in Nineteenth Century.”<sup>75</sup> Aldridge’s story had something to teach America about racial assumptions in New York, and demanded a change in how race was understood. White and black interaction on stage was not unthinkable, but historically precedented. It could happen again.

### Claiming Shakespeare’s Authority

Blacks claimed the authority of Shakespeare by stating that the correct embodiment of Othello was by a black man. One article from the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1923 directly challenged white depictions of Othello with the headline “Critics Attempt to Make Othello White.”<sup>76</sup> The white Othello was created; he was something racists had to “make.” He quoted the findings of a psychology lecturer in New York who gave a talk on “Othello, a Study in Race Prejudice” at the Friends of Negro Forum at 169 West 131<sup>st</sup> street. He argued that there was a psychological desire for white critics to find Othello to be non-black: “they have advanced all sort of arguments to prove that Othello was not black although Shakespeare distinctly said so...some declare that...since the idea was repugnant to them as white men, it would also have been repugnant to so great a mind as Shakespeare.” He argued instead that “there was no race prejudice in Shakespeare’s time,” and that “the play shows that great love will overcome all

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<sup>74</sup> J.A. Rogers, “The American Negro in Paris,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, September 14, 1927.

<sup>75</sup> Henry F. Downing, “Protest Over O’Neill’s Play Recalls Day of Ira Aldridge,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, April 26, 1924.

<sup>76</sup> “Critics Attempt to Make Othello White,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, March 21, 1923.

obstacles.” This psychological reframing makes whiteness the pathology. Whites ignored the truth of Shakespeare because of blind prejudice. Shakespeare was depicted in the black press as a man free of racial prejudice who supported the correctness of the black Othello over the white Othello. By reframing the history of the English Renaissance, blacks directly challenged white ownership of Shakespeare.

Other black writers also argued that because Shakespeare was not racist he was able to create a noble hero who was also a black man. J.A. Rogers, for instance, used Shakespeare to argue for black rights, stating that “Shakespeare, when he created Othello with such stateliness and pride, taught that color had no effect on character.”<sup>77</sup> It was one thing for black Americans to deny that “color” determined worth, and quite another to say that the cultural icon, William Shakespeare, was the one who “taught” the lesson. Through this revision of history, black New Yorkers enlisted Shakespeare to authorize their humanity and their struggle for equality. By arguing that one of the most revered writers in white America had the intention of supporting black equality, black writers authored a new concept of the “Shakespearean.” This argument undermined white theatrical traditions by exposing the racism of white scholarship, and perhaps more damningly, exposed an incorrect reading of Shakespeare.

The implications of the correctness of the black Othello enabled radical politics that challenged several strands of white racism. One of the most direct indictments of white claims to Othello came from former slave and co-founder of the Negro Historical Society, John E. Bruce.<sup>78</sup> In answering the question, “Was Othello a Negro,” Bruce contextualized the argument by reversing scientific racial analysis, critiquing white claims to Shakespeare, and celebrating black history. Not only does he answer that Othello was a Negro, but he states that the Negro race was

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<sup>77</sup> J.A. Rogers, “From Superman to Man:” A Story Which Blasts the Idea of White Supremacy,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, October 31, 1923.

<sup>78</sup> John E. Bruce “Was Othello a Negro?” (New York City: 1920).

“pure:” “there are only two great races. The black-African or Negro race, and the Jewish race.”

The “white “race “unlike the African or Negro race it is not a pure race.”<sup>79</sup> Bruce went to another major authority to support his case: “One has only to read Gen. 10 chap. 6-20 to settle any doubt one may now have as to what race Othello belonged, for there one will find our family tree with all its branches.”<sup>80</sup> He argued that “Othello was a Moor. The correct spelling of this word is Maur-meaning black-which is the color of all that branch of the Hamitic family.”<sup>81</sup> He also enlisted white authorities to make his case: “Walker Given, a member of the New York Shakespeare Society, in his book says: “If Othello had been only tawny like the prince of Morocco, and not in strong offensive contrast to Desdemona, Brabantio could not have objected to him.”<sup>82</sup> He contrasted the false traditions of current white Othellos with the proper embodiment done by Ira Aldridge, writing, “modern tragedians in America and Europe who have essayed the role of Othello have bowed to the popular prejudice and portrayed the character as that of a white man or a man of tawny complexion;” by contrast, “Ira Aldridge, the black Roscius, played Othello in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1850” and “pleased witnesses of his masterful interpretation of the character”<sup>83</sup> Ira Aldridge was not only seen to be a great actor, but the true embodiment of Shakespeare’s vision: “Ira Aldridge was the greatest tragedian our race has produced...His Othello was the Othello of Shakespeare the black-moor-the Negro whom Shakespeare created to be portrayed as only such a consummate artist as Aldridge could portray and interpret the character.”<sup>84</sup> Here, Bruce co-opted the language of Shakespearean correctness

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 11. Interestingly, Bruce also cites a history of white scholarship on the play, arguing that it has been neglected in the country because of racism. He writes on page 13: “the play of Othello which is conceded to be the strongest and dramatically the most powerful of the Shakespearean dramas is not popular in America...because its

to argue for the equality of blacks in America. Othello's heroic blackness, according to Bruce, was authorized by Shakespeare-he was "the Negro whom Shakespeare created." Bruce's conclusions about Othello were overtly confrontational, political, and contemporary. He stated:

If Othello were a living entity and now resided in America, his gentlemanly demeanor, his clean character, his personal charm, his moral and public worth, his dignity and his genius as a great general would count for little in securing to him in public places the courtesy and due to one of his prominence and distinction. He would most unquestionably be rated as a Negro and treated as such by white men.<sup>85</sup>

Bruce associated positive qualities- charm, morality, genius, and dignity- with the black Othello. America's injustice toward blacks was not only against human rights, but also against Shakespeare, who would be upset with America's treatment of his noble hero. The redefinition of the past mandated a change in the present.

#### Black Performance: a Challenge to Minstrelsy

It was not only through history and Shakespearean correctness that blacks claimed Othello, but also through performances. Robeson would not perform his Othello in New York until 1943, but several black performances of *Othello* occurred in New York and throughout the East Coast before Robeson.<sup>86</sup> Though most African American stage histories highlight the African Theatre and then move to Paul Robeson, there are several examples of blacks acting in the play in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Though scant evidence exists of the performances, a black troupe known as "the Astor Place Company of Coloured Tragedians," operating from 1883-1888, performed an all-black Othello on numerous occasions with Ben

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leading and most prominent character is a Negro, a Moor." He then goes on to quote John Quincy Adams remarks on the play, mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study. .

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>86</sup> Those happening in other cities were given press in the New York papers and therefore become relevant as contributing to the meaning of the play in black New York.

Ford as the star and J.A. Arneaux starring as Iago.<sup>87</sup> Odell notes that Desdemona was played by “Alice Brooks, an Octoroon.”<sup>88</sup> George Odell’s scholarship of this group reflected the understanding of race in the theatre. He distinguished between black performance and white legitimacy. The index segregated the “legitimate” white performances of *Othello* from the ones attempted by “negroes.” The existence of the black-created *Othello* did not necessarily mean that white scholars accepted it as a theatrical equal.

The creation of the Harlem-based Lafayette Players in 1914 signified a rebirth of black dramatic activity in the city. At the Lafayette in 1916, Sterling Wright starred in an all-black *Othello* to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. The performance was contextualized by the history of Ira Aldridge who was called “his forerunner.”<sup>89</sup> The program of this performance, housed at the New York Public Library archives, could be mistaken for one at one of the “legitimate” white theatres of the time.<sup>90</sup> The language used claimed a high status of performance. The producers called themselves “The Elite Amusement Corporation,” and the program advertised its star as a legitimate actor: “Edward Sterling Wright Presents his Own Company in William Shakespeare’s Immortal Drama *Othello*.” Like the programs and events featured at the new elite white theaters, The Lafayette featured “Selections by Lafayette Ladies Orchestra.”

In *The New York Age*, Lucien White reviewed the *Othello* production with a theatre critic’s eye, not allowing the momentous occasion to overshadow the fact that some actors “might be deficient in practical stage experience.”<sup>91</sup> However, he saw its larger significance as an

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<sup>87</sup> Odell, *Annals*, Volume XII, 305, 310.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> C.A. Leonard, “Negro Histrionism in U.S.,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, May 8, 1929.

<sup>90</sup> See figures in chapter four for examples of these playbills in the legitimate theatres.

<sup>91</sup> Lucien H. White, “Edward Sterling Wright in ‘Othello’ Premiere with All-Negro Company,” *The New York Age*, April 27, 1916.

indication that this “most elaborate” of “Shakespearean productions, is marking an epoch also in the development of histrionic capacity among Negro actors. This is in pronounced evidence this week at the Lafayette Theatre, Seventh Avenue and 131<sup>st</sup> street, where a company of Negro players...is presenting Shakespeare’s “OTHELLO.”<sup>92</sup> The review had at its center a picture of “Edward Sterling Wright.” This heroic image in the New York paper performed the nobility of Shakespeare’s character. In contrast to the criminal Othello, Wright was linked to the dignity of Othello.

There were discussions of other African Americans playing or rumored to be playing Othello in the city. The national edition of *The Chicago Defender* printed in 1921 that Charles Gilpin was having success in the serious role of *The Emperor Jones* and was said to contemplate playing Shakespeare’s Othello.<sup>93</sup> Another story, “Johnson Takes Othello in Role in Noted Play,” detailed how “famous pugilist” Jack Johnson was going to perform Othello in clothes from “the sultan of Morocco.”<sup>94</sup> *The New York Amsterdam News* reported that “Howard Players Present Shakespeare.” The essay stated that the “program was given to stimulate interest in the plays of the dramatist. The scenes represented included Othello, with Theodore Spaulding as Othello and Kathleen Hilyer as Desdemona.”<sup>95</sup> Theatrical work at the black college became a major outlet for experimenting with black-authored artistic expressions. Dr. Carter G. Woodson was the advertised speaker of a commencement at the West Virginia Collegiate instituted where “one of the features of the commencement season will be the presentation of “Othello” by students under the direction of Miss Mary L. Strong.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> *Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, October 8, 1921. Krasner notes that at other times Gilpin said he had no desire to play Othello.

<sup>94</sup> “Johnson Takes Othello in Role in Noted Play,” *Chicago Defender, National Edition*, December 9, 1922.

<sup>95</sup> “Howard Players Present Shakespeare,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, May 9, 1923.

<sup>96</sup> “Dr. Carter G. Woodson to Deliver Address,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, February 21, 1925.



Othello's capacity to speak to black New Yorkers was not defined by the singular event of Wright's performance, but by many distinct productions. The democratization of the black Othello made the play about many African Americans, capable of speaking to diverse experiences. Aldridge was a genius, but he was not the only one able to perform Othello's dignity. Many actors and black Americans were able to counter the stereotype that they were best suited to humorous minstrelsy by taking on, or associating themselves with, the noble Moor of Venice.

This was no mere aping of the white community, however. As perceived by the black community, Wright's performance of Othello was a living critique of white constructions of Shakespeare. In a fascinating juxtaposition on page six of Lester Walton's "Dramatics and Athletics" in *The New York Age*, the reasoned review of Wright's Othello by Lucien H. White was printed next to Walton's searing indictment of the "lower House of Representatives" who presented "A Modern Othello." Walton's essay used the play to satirize Southern representatives of the House of Representatives' introduction of a bill to establish "a juvenile court in the District of Columbia." The House's conduct reflected their reluctance to accept Shakespeare's belief in the equality of the Negro race: "the principal actors were Southern white gentleman who are somewhat cold toward the illustrious bard because of his authorship of a great drama in which a dusky suitor professed his burning love for a fair damsel. What a thought!"<sup>97</sup> Walton jokingly affirmed Shakespeare's intention to create a black hero and positioned him against mainstream white thought. This "Othello" was a farce of comedic characters, such as Representative Howard of Georgia who, "boiling to the lynching point, says and does some funny things, doing a Charlie Chaplin."<sup>98</sup> Walton concluded:

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<sup>97</sup> Lester A. Walton, "A Modern Othello," *The New York Age*, April 27, 1916.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

It has not been made clear why the piece put on in the House of Representative Monday should be called “A Modern Othello,” or who played the title role...lucidity, logic, consistency are not looked for....such men...talk longer and say less when discussing the race issue...but it is for this reason that they are not taken seriously and their verbal antics are regarded as excellent material for the comic supplement.<sup>99</sup>

Walton used Othello to reverse the underlying principles of minstrelsy. It was not the black race but white racism that was humorous. White Southerners could not see beyond their racism to recognize the hypocrisy of their arguments, or how foolish their performances of white racism made them appear.

Wright’s performance was used elsewhere as evidence against the notion that blacks were best suited to humorous minstrelsy. In one essay, a writer critiqued the fact that at Sterling Wright’s performance, in front of an esteemed Shakespearean critic, a black performer tried to get a laugh with a minstrel performance:

Sir Arthur Berrbohm Tree came all the way from England and lent encouragement to our efforts in the drama by being present the night the late Edward Sterling Wright appeared in “Othello” It would have done Mr. Belasco’s head good to have witnessed how an audience at the Lafayette Theater resented an attempt at ridicule of the race by a comedian of the same race. This gentleman was made to understand that the time did not call for the buffoonery and ridicule which he attempted to put over in the presence of a distinguished audience, the majority made up of Negroes.<sup>100</sup>

This “buffoonery” was similarly critiqued in *The New York Age* by A.G. Shaw, whose letter about the same incident, entitled, “Drive the Vulgar Actors from the Stage,” noted that “the

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> “Broadway Bound,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 11, 1926.

audience hissed this idiot from the stage.”<sup>101</sup> He continued “it is to be hoped that the colored people will drive all his kind off the stage, and compel them to make a living where they have talent to do so, for their place is not the stage.” Shaw saw hope in the audience response: “it is inspiring to see that our people no longer tolerate ridicule from those of our race performing on the stage and whom we give a chance to make a living. It was most gratifying to all present to see those would make us appear ridiculous, publicly condemned. We must not stop there, but drive everyone one of them off in the future attempts to entertain our people by ridiculing our women.”<sup>102</sup> The production helped combat the stereotypes of a confining minstrelsy. The contrast of the legitimate black Shakespearean performance shed light on minstrelsy. *Othello* was the antidote to minstrel degradation.

Indeed, blacks directly attacked the language of minstrelsy through the history of the black *Othello*. An essay in *Opportunity* opined that “representation of Negroes on the stage above the role of buffoon seem recently to have been weakened considerably” because of blacks like Aldridge who “throughout his career...carried himself with distinction.”<sup>103</sup> Aldridge, Wright, and other black *Othellos* on the East Coast of America provided an argument against the assumption that black performers were natural comics. *Opportunity* columnist Willis Richardson subversively discussed the performances of *Othello* to challenge the legitimacy of the white stage: “for the past twenty-five years the negro has made his mark on the stage by playing the fool,” but now the future is “hopeful.”<sup>104</sup> He later argued that black dialect made Shakespeare sound better:

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<sup>101</sup> “Drive the Vulgar Actors from the Stage,” *The New York Age*, April 6, 1916.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> “*Othello* Again,” *Opportunity* (February 1925): 36.

<sup>104</sup> Willis Richardson, “The Negro and the Stage,” *Opportunity* (October 1924): 30.

The future of Negro men and women as interpreters of character is very hopeful, and these hopes will be more fully and more quickly attained when they are enabled by a sufficient number of Negro plays to interpret the Negro character...not only is the Negro's dialect more sweet-toned, but his use of the perfect English is warmer and more soothing than the Caucasians....let us change a familiar passage of Shakespeare, one of Iago's hypocritical speeches to Othello, from the original to the Negro dialect... it will be noticed that the Negro dialect allows for no harsh-sounding consonants; even the liquid "r" which adds so much to tone-color in the pure English is eliminated as far as possible."<sup>105</sup>

The language that was mocked for being incorrect was celebrated for being more theatrically pleasing. Richardson claimed that black actors used a more effective form of Shakespearean English than their white counterparts, and in so doing, reframed the foundation of minstrelsy. Real black dialect is more Shakespearean. He then lamented the dearth of black actors in serious drama: "As in the past there has been an over abundance of humor about the Negro actor which has made him as good a comedian as any other, so beneath the surface there is a seriousness in him which should make him as good an actor in the legitimate drama as any other."<sup>106</sup> As this case reveals, black Shakespeare was not primarily about creating theatre that was as good as white theatre. It was about changing the definitions of what good theatre meant. Black theatre was defined through the legend of Ira Aldridge, the performance of a noble black Othello on the stage and through embracing the uniqueness of black Shakespearean dialect. There were a family of responses within the black community surrounding Othello's capacity to advance the black cause, yet they all shared the belief that minstrel drama was not true black drama.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

In his essay on black history in *Opportunity*, Kelly Miller noted that “the negro is often forced to feel that there is a conspiracy of silence to ignore his best deeds and to exploit his imperfections.”<sup>107</sup> Miller critiqued the larger societal phenomenon responsible for white definitions of the black criminal Othello. He stated, “if a negro athlete takes the world’s sprinting record, the feat is exploited, while his race is ignored. But if a Negro commits a crime its heinousness is enhanced by reason of the color of the criminal. The reputation of the race suffers seriously by the exploitation of its vices and the suppression of its virtues.”<sup>108</sup> His observation is particularly apt in the context of this discussion. According to the mainstream white press, black Othellos were criminals and never heroes. The white-authored black performances of criminality and violence had to be confronted.

To challenge this, writers associated the performance of dignity with blackness in direct opposition to the black performances in the white press. The public presentation of serious black theatre bled into, and often became conflated with, the public presentation of noble black Americans. Kelly Miller wrote that “the negro’s pride of race is humiliated when he contemplates the great drama of this continent and finds that he is accorded no honorable part in the performance.”<sup>109</sup> In the performances of American history, black actions had been associated with the worst behaviors. J.A. Rogers quoted a Russian paper on reports that Ira Aldridge’s de-emphasized the savage idea of blackness: “no sooner did the Moor make his appearance than I felt myself, I confess it, instantly subjugated not by the terrible and menacing look of the hero, but the naturalness, calm dignity and by the stamp of power and force that he manifested and of which he also seemed to be ignorant contrary to the custom of great actors who very often on the stage appear too much pleased with themselves...it was the lion asleep which even when asleep

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<sup>107</sup> Miller, 86.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

commands respect.”<sup>110</sup> Clarence Cameron White wrote of his visit to Aldridge’s house that he was struck by the “large life-size picture of Ira Aldridge taken in his costume as Othello.....and one had but to read the names thereon to realize in what high esteem Ira Aldridge was held as an actor and man.”<sup>111</sup> The numerous pictures of Aldridge in the press actuated this performance of dignity. The black Othello was an affirmation of the character and the man who played him. Blacks in the New Negro movement reversed the associations created by the white press and insisted that the performance of blackness was positive.

### Conclusion

For generations, whites exploited Shakespeare’s cultural significance to advance an ideology of whiteness. Yet the discourse created around the black Othello, especially in the New Negro movement, helped African Americans reframe the meanings of race by restoring black history, claiming Shakespearean correctness, challenging white scholarship, celebrating black artistry, disproving the assumptions of minstrelsy and insisting that the performance of blackness was the performance of dignity. Though people differed in how it should be employed, the black Othello provided opportunities to challenge the ideology of whiteness that had been embedded in “the Shakespearean.” Othello served various purposes in countering white history and disproving scientific racism. In this way, Othello became black for the first time because it was finally African Americans who authored the meanings of his story.

Yet while the tone of this chapter has been largely celebratory of black resistance, it is important to note that not all African Americans accepted Othello’s place in the black cause of civil rights. Though it was the positive aspects of Othello’s story that black leaders associated

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<sup>110</sup> J.A. Rogers, “J.A. Rogers Tells of Distinguished White and Colored Londoners,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 26, 1925.

<sup>111</sup> Clarence Cameron White. “A Visit to the Home of a Great Actor,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 22, 1927.

with black identity, it is also true that Shakespeare's Othello murders his white wife. Othello became black, but what kind of black man did he become? In the early twentieth century, writers such as Rogers, Miller, Johnson, Richardson made him the embodiment of everything good and possible in America. In later years, African Americans would come to question the value of the association.

As we have also seen, sympathetic whites still linked the black Othello and performer to essentialized qualities that perpetuated an ideology of inherent racial difference. Further, non-sympathetic whites continued the same Shakespearean whiteness of the nineteenth century. This conflicted relationship to the black Othello in New York, which involved black-authored resistance, romanticized white celebration, and hostile white racism, is essential context for Paul Robeson's Broadway Othello of 1943-1944. While these traditions were largely segregated until the 1940s, when Robeson came onto the Shubert stage, they came directly to a head. The performance was about black resistance and elite white consumption of an exoticized "other"; it was a claim to black humanity, a source of white hatred, and a continuation of romantic racialism.

But we are not there yet. Before detailing the Robeson performance it is important to examine changes in the consumption of the New York Shakespeare production. The shift in audience and in theatre economics was fundamental to racial constructions and the creation of the first "legitimate" black Othello.

## CHAPTER 4: SELLING THE WHITE OTHELLO

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century New York, professional performances of Shakespeare's *Othello* became consumer products sold alongside pianos, breath mints, and ladies' corsets.<sup>1</sup> Playbills turned into etiquette books with a catalog of advertisements designed to sell a lifestyle. The people coming to see the shows bought the experience of Shakespeare as a marker of elite identity at new theatres such as Niblo's Garden, Wallack's Theatre, Booth's Theatre, and The Academy of Music.<sup>2</sup> These theaters were not the rowdy Bowery, site of large-scale riots, but places where "courtesy to the actors...dictates that every attendant at this theatre shall remain seated until the fall of the curtain."<sup>3</sup> While Edwin Forrest's early *Othello* caused men to weep and shout in the theatre, Edwin Booth's made them ponder in silence.

In the final chapter, I argue that Paul Robeson's success in *Othello* can be partially explained through this new pattern of white theatre consumption. Robeson was accepted as *Othello* because whites bought an image of romanticized blackness. Before discussing Robeson it is therefore essential to examine the characteristics of the "legitimate" New York theatre event in the decades leading up to his performance.

To frame the changes occurring in this chapter, I return to the work of Bruce McConachie and Cheryl Harris. McConachie convincingly argues that theatre audiences fundamentally changed in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, New York theatre was funded by elites who produced message-controlled performances for the working-class public, who made up much of the audience. By the 1830s, the spirit of Jacksonian

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<sup>1</sup> See figure six for one example of a playbill with Louis James as *Othello*.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the creation and audiences of these spaces, see McConachie 157-256. Other elite New York theaters included Daly's Fifth Avenue Theatre, The New Bowery, Keene's Theatre, the Lyceum Theatre and The Broadway Theatre.

<sup>3</sup> *Othello* playbill, "The Lorgnette," 10 September 1870, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.



egalitarianism had helped transform the theatre culture into one dominated by a white, male working class. By the mid-to-late nineteenth century the conditions of theatre-going generally, and Shakespeare consumption specifically, had changed yet again. McConachie calls the new culture a “business class theatre for the respectable” which no longer catered to the Bowery b’hoys who had made an actor like Edwin Forrest a working class legend.<sup>4</sup> Theatre spaces became private, dark, and elitist. Shakespeare became highbrow art.

Cheryl Harris argues that “whiteness and property share a common premise...of a right to exclude.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in the late nineteenth century, the legitimate New York theatre developed through exclusion. To belong, theatre-goers had to buy the right things, read the right books, and act with the correct etiquette. The new theaters, their products, and their codes of behavior further erased African Americans from the professional white Shakespearean theatre. Actors distanced the character from blackness, newspapers reminded the public of white stage history, and critics regularly invoked Shakespearean “correctness” to authorize a racial ideology. Unlike previous eras in the New York theatre, however, these building blocks of the white Shakespeare were present in playbills, making them an increasingly defining aspect of audience reception. Audience members read about what Shakespeare’s intentions when they sat down to experience the event. The assumptions about the bard’s universal messages consciously excluded non-whites; whiteness was still property when it came to legitimate Shakespeare.

Also unique to this time period was the fact that women were targeted as consumers. The playbills sold beauty products and etiquette that outlined proper female roles. To consider Desdemona an example of this ideal, it was important to remove any hint that her relationship

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<sup>4</sup> McConachie, 157.

<sup>5</sup> Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1714.

with Othello was miscegenous. Race and gender were created simultaneously: the affirmation of Desdemona's proper womanhood depended on muting Othello's blackness.

The understanding of the true "Shakespearean" became more important to the class of people attending the theatre at the end of the century. Lawrence Levine has rightly argued that Shakespeare became "the possession of the educated portions of society who disseminated his plays for the enlightenment of the average folk who were to swallow him not for their entertainment but for their education."<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare had always been seen as a genius, but now his genius required careful academic study. Performances needed to be compelling and supported by literary authorities. The idea of doing a performance according to Shakespeare's true intentions, which had existed from the early 1800s, thus gained greater importance during these years. In contrast to the black-authored Othello, these elites tried to disconnect Othello's messages from the everyday concerns of the majority of those living in the city, especially black New Yorkers who had no "third tier" to experience Shakespeare in the new playhouses.

### A New Theater of Consumerism

The stunning career of Edwin Forrest as Othello (1826-1872) reveals the shifting theatre scene in microcosm. Passionate, emotional, and fiery in the first two decades of performance, Forrest's Othello became more reserved and cerebral in the latter decades of his career. Forrest's Moor began with boldness and bravado; it became elitist highbrow Shakespeare. *The Albion*

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<sup>6</sup> Levine, 31. There are also, however, several examples of *Othello* serving as a metaphor for various cultural phenomena in these years despite the fact that he was now part of the "highbrow" culture. Othello's lines were referenced in fiction to describe character motivations and personality. He remained the standard of "jealousy" and real people were often described as being as jealous as Othello. The phrase "Othello's occupation's gone" continued to refer to the unemployed or dispossessed. Other seemingly random references appeared in various forms: a travel journal stated that it was "human nature" to fall in love over stories of grand adventure, just as Desdemona had done with Othello; a political cartoon showed "Othello" Arthur who was depicted with a pillow with the words "President's Veto," deliberating if he should smother the "river of Harbor Bill;" a short story in *Harper's Bazaar* described a character as "a sort of Othello for jealousy." Though less frequent, these references continued to rely on an understanding of Shakespeare's language and plot and indicate that New York readers still knew the play enough to get the jokes.

noted that his Othello was “materially altered” in later years: “he is infinitely more subdued and quiet in his acting; his readings are more elaborated and studied. His action and attitudes are more classic in their character; and a dignified repose, rendered majestic at times by his imposing figure, gives a tone to his performances wholly unlike the unrepressed energy.”<sup>7</sup> Forrest’s “unrepressed energy” was not as appealing as the “dignified repose” he brought to a studied performance. One critic suggested that the Forrest “will be brilliant beyond example” because his acting was “so wonderfully improved.”<sup>8</sup> Another writer affirmed the intellectual qualities of the new Forrest in opposition to his former style: “his great popularity from the start was too great, yielded as it was, without deliberation and reflection, by those at whose hands it was claimed.....the result of all this was the gradual formation of a vicious style of declamation.”<sup>9</sup> Forrest, he argued, has since had a “reformation...from that era in his career,” which has transformed him into “one of the most instructive and delightful expositors of the worth and the beauty of Shakespeare.”<sup>10</sup> Forrest became an instructor of Shakespeare in contrast to his previous performances which were described for his ability to realize Shakespeare’s very essence. The intellectual assessment of Shakespearean performance replaced the visceral passionate empathic response of the mid-century audiences that had lacked “deliberation” and “reflection.” The result of the change was to make Shakespeare available to those able to properly analyze his texts. Forrest transcended the energetic “declamation” and came to teach the true “beauty of Shakespeare.” As the elite began to dominate New York theatre audiences, Forrest muted his emotional outbursts to highlight a thoughtful Shakespearean Othello.

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<sup>7</sup> “The Drama,” *The Albion* 5, Issue 38 (September 9, 1846): 456.

<sup>8</sup> “Theatrical Gossip,” *The United States Magazine*, (January 1848).

<sup>9</sup> “A Critique on the Acting of Mr. Forrest,” *Spirit of the Times*, September 18, 1847

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

The reasoned highbrow interpretations of Shakespeare were born alongside the consumer culture which made the theatre experience about purchasing more than the performance. The images of two playbills from different decades in Forrest's career as *Othello* encapsulate the changing conditions of New York theatre-going. The first, from the Bowery in 1840, simply lists Forrest's name (and that of his costar) and the play *Othello* with an exclamation point. Of central importance to the event was the star actor and Shakespeare's "sublime Tragedy."<sup>11</sup> The second, from Niblo's Garden in 1864, sells the play with various consumer goods. Forrest's name is still important, but "Cady, Brownell, and Co. Clothing" has comparably-sized print.<sup>12</sup> The hyper-masculine Bowery b'hoys who had followed him so religiously early in his career presumably had little use for "the duplex elliptic spring skirt." Seeing Shakespeare was one of many attractions for the new audience.

An 1898 playbill from Louis James's *Othello* further evidences the culture of consumerism and etiquette that defined late nineteenth century theatre-going. The cast is listed next to an advertisement for "the best fitting" corset; "ladies" were advised to take off their hats during the performance; there was a space in the theatre where the hats could be checked "free of charge;" and "Sohmer" pianos had the largest type size on the bill. The audience coming to see the show had the finances to buy the finest pianos, and the leisure time to learn how to play them.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the people who came to see *Othello* in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were self-consciously elite. Going to the theatre was a

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<sup>11</sup> *Othello* playbill, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>12</sup> *Othello* playbill, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>13</sup> *Othello* playbill, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections. See the work of the excellent historian of U.S. Women's History, Christine Stansell, for a greater discussion of popular culture and New York working class women; particularly, Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

performance of self, which could be as important as the play itself. “Literature, the stage, and fashionable society sent their representatives” to the performance of Ernesto Rossi’s *Othello*, according to one review; “in the auditorium, as upon the stage, the atmosphere was that of thought and feeling and refined exultation over a momentous occurrence.”<sup>14</sup> The adjectives reaffirmed the elite exclusivity of the experience. The audience was “fashionable” and “refined,” and what they experienced was “momentous.” Theatre-going became a skill and intellectual achievement that only members of an intellectual sub-culture of Shakespearean consumption could attain. One playbill, for instance, advertised that “a great treat is in store for the intellectual lovers of good acting.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast to those who wept openly at the Bowery theatre, these audiences appreciated acting through intellectual engagement. The advice delivered in the playbills smacked of a superficial worldview. One writer in an *Othello* playbill insisted that “the three most difficult things are to keep a secret, to forget an injury, and to make good use of leisure.”<sup>16</sup> While blacks were struggling with the backlash of Reconstruction and white working class men and women struggled with increasing wealth disparities and horrific living conditions, the people who consumed *Othello* were told how to use their free time and keep from gossip.

The theatre provided a place for the display of etiquette, fashion, and a performed identity. Bruce McConachie argues that “the newer writers of etiquette manuals assumed that one’s identity was little more than a succession of social roles and urged the manipulation of the outer mask to alter inner feelings.”<sup>17</sup> The New York elite celebrated themselves for their unique role in history. “That we are rapidly developing into an art-loving people,” wrote one columnist

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<sup>14</sup> *Othello* playbill, “Booth’s Theatre,” 31 October 1881, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>15</sup> *Othello* playbill, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections..

<sup>16</sup> *Othello* playbill, “Bowery Theatre,” 4 September 1875, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>17</sup> McConachie 230.

in Booth's playbill, "goes without saying...it can be seen in the importation of pictures of the very highest grade, and the largely-increasing attendance at art sales and annual exhibitions."<sup>18</sup>

The new standards of appreciating the finer things had implications at home: "Today household decoration is as great a study and as high an art as the most finished work of a Diaz, Corot or Meissonier."<sup>19</sup> The rules of etiquette extended outside the theatre.

*Othello* playbills of the late nineteenth century reflected and fueled the development of external social roles by linking identity with consumer goods. One playbill debated the best model of piano, outlining the great "piano-forte supremacy."<sup>20</sup> The audiences going to see professional productions of *Othello* were instructed that an array of consumer goods were necessary to their identity. On one page surrounding the cast list of *Othello*, the following items were sold: "carriages, Tiffany and Co. diamonds, watches, silverware, bronzes, Arnold India and cashmere shawls, cabinet furniture, and Chickering Pianos."<sup>21</sup> The items themselves created a sense of exclusiveness; they were sold as being the best in the world. The skirts came from Paris, and the shawls came from India.

Changes in theatre spaces reflected these values of externality. Instead of pit, box, and gallery, there was a family circle, box, and parquette. At the Woods Museum theatre, for instance, prices were differentiated for the dress circle, parquette, reserved, museum and family circles, and the orchestra.<sup>22</sup> The theaters sold their physical beauty. The Broadway Theatre advertised itself as "the handsomest and safest theatre in the world," and The Grand Opera

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<sup>18</sup> *Othello* playbill, "Booth's Theatre," 8 October 1881, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Othello* playbill, "Booth's Theatre," 27 May 1869, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>21</sup> *Othello* playbill, "Bowery Theatre," 4 September 1875, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>22</sup> *Othello* playbill, "Wood's Museum," 23 September 1874, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections..

House similarly called itself “the most elegant theatre in the world.”<sup>23</sup> Others made mention of particular features such as “the ladies’ cloak room in the lobby.”<sup>24</sup> Physical appearances were central to the theatre-going experience. One *Othello* playbill advertised that “the patrons of the Bowery Theatre will be somewhat agreeably surprised at the complete transformation in appearance that this house has undergone during the past few months.”<sup>25</sup> The external beautification of spaces became essential elements of the event. And unlike early nineteenth century buildings, which were susceptible to fire, these houses prided themselves on safety. The Shubert theatre advertised that according to the fire commissioner, “with every seat occupied,” it “can be emptied in less than three minutes.” These were not dangerous places of communion and emotional reaction, but beautiful and safe museums of polite distance and passive reception.

These values influenced the play’s reception. There was an increased emphasis on the external qualities of the performance. One production of *Othello* boasted that “the scenery and costumes for this tragedy, it will be remembered are the most magnificent ever seen in Shakespearean representations here or elsewhere.”<sup>26</sup> Another ensured that “the scenery has been painted by capable artists of reputation.”<sup>27</sup> In the consumer theatre of the late nineteenth century, architectural beauty and “reputation” became valued alongside intellectual acting and thoughtful performance.

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<sup>23</sup> *Othello* playbill, “Broadway Theatre” 14 March 1891, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections..

<sup>24</sup> *Othello* playbill, “Booth’s Theatre,” undated, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>25</sup> *Othello* playbill, “Bowery Theatre,” 4 September 1875, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>26</sup> *Othello* playbill, “The Stage,” 27 March 1871, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>27</sup> *Othello* playbill, “Booth’s Theatre,” 7 February 1881, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

## Selling Gender

The second Forrest *Othello* playbill also reveals that the new consumerism at the theaters specifically targeted women. The products sold and advice given created the idealized woman as domestic, image-conscious, moral, and prone to emotional decisions. *Othello* playbills gave parenting advice and told women which sewing machines to buy. McConachie argues that “theatre going” was “a predominantly male activity” in the early nineteenth century but came to include women after 1855. Their perceived delicate sensibilities were not to be offended at the show; the goods being marketed prescribed constant improvement in their physical appearance.<sup>28</sup>

More print space was generally used in the playbills to discuss gender and to sell proper womanhood than was used to discuss *Othello*. Jokes told in the playbills could rely on normative notions of female submissiveness. “Why is a proud woman like a music book? Because she is full of airs,” one writer joked.<sup>29</sup> Others linked the products they sold to appropriate female behavior and ideals of beauty. “The best cosmetic is a clear conscience,” one etiquette writer opined.<sup>30</sup> An ad for balm read “ladies discard injurious padding- Madame Jumels’ mammarial balm and patent breast elevator, to develop the form physiologically.”<sup>31</sup> Another advised that “good and well prepared food beautifies the physique” and that “wrinkles are produced by want of a variety of foods.” Women’s undergarments and breath fresheners were sold right next to cast

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<sup>28</sup> McConachie 94, 157. See the work of Kathy Peiss for a non-traditional argument about the role self-beautification in the lives of early 20<sup>th</sup> century women. Peiss sees some value in women’s self-definition through makeup, through “hope in a jar”): *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998). The trend toward female beautification through consumer products was not limited to the theatre; through the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, women’s magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* had an exponential increase in the number of beauty goods and products sold to American women.

<sup>29</sup> *Othello* playbill, “Bowery Theatre” 4 September 1875, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>30</sup> *Othello* playbill, “The Lorgnette” September 1870, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>31</sup> *Othello* playbill, “The Stage” 26 January 1867, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections..



lists; New York women were told what was lacking in their feminine selves and how to purchase the remedy.

The playbills sold literature and advice to support these consumer prescriptions. “Madame Bovary” was advertised as a book about a deviant woman whose “pride turns against herself,” leading to abandonment of her role “wife and mother.”<sup>32</sup> *Beauty is Power* was sold as “a clever book that every woman, young and old, ought to read over and over again.”<sup>33</sup> It dealt with various codes of proper etiquette, including “proposing, on being refused, why men are refused, romantic lovers, time for marrying, long engagements, manufacture of husbands, husbands in society, and married women dancing.”<sup>34</sup> It was not only products being that were being sold, but an ideology, which was supported by a literature of correct behavior. The playbills affirmed the importance of the domestic women by offering parenting advice. One playbill advised “don’t be afraid to show the children that you love them...it is good to humor your children in preserving their individuality and in fostering a true self respect...teach them, too, the value of money.”<sup>35</sup> The community viewing *Othello* was small enough that an anecdote such as “Miss Libbie, daughter of William Moller, the sugar refiner, was the most elegantly dressed lady at Ralph Clark’s recent reception” meant something to the people watching the play.<sup>36</sup> Other playbills lamented behavior that created bad impressions: “too many ill-bred American women have made their appearance in Paris, and, by their impertinent and indecent conduct have done a great deal of harm to the whole class of their countrywomen.”<sup>37</sup> For

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<sup>32</sup> *Othello* playbill, “Booth’s Theatre,” 7 February 1881, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>33</sup> *Othello* playbill, “The Stage,” 27 March 1871, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Othello* playbill, “Booth’s Theatre” 8 October 1881.

<sup>36</sup> *Othello* playbill, “The Stage” 28 May 1869, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>37</sup> *Othello* playbill, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

women, the theatre-going event became about much more than the play *Othello*. At the theatre, New York women were collectively told that their femininity depended on products, a code of proper mothering, and avoidance of certain behaviors.

Nor was it only the playbills supporting this ideology. In the late nineteenth century, *Othello*'s figurative capacity to outline the characteristics of proper womanhood made it frequent source material for jokes in satirical periodicals. "Puck" tried to put a humorous twist on the scene of violence from Act V, scene II of Shakespeare's play: "Ball this evening dear?" inquired Desdemona of Othello, when she saw him loading up his old navy revolver. No, not this evening, love, sm'other evening," he replied, as he reached for the pillow and wedged it softly down her aesophagus."<sup>38</sup> Bruce McConachie notes that during these years "most female characters who stray beyond the confines of respectable domesticity are treated comically," and in these popular depictions, Desdemona was a straying woman.<sup>39</sup> A humorous poem entitled "Othello's Apology" written from Othello's perspective laments "since we married are/ I find she can no more a flap-jack bake Than I can cope with Hercules."<sup>40</sup> Like minstrel adaptations, this Desdemona is ridiculed for not being able to cook. Another article on "Desdemona" wondered if the "slang" phrase "to give away" originated with Shakespeare's character. The article jokes, "Othello was a colored man, and therefore probably familiar with slang. Many of the choicest bits of current talk derive their being from negroes, and as Othello seemed to seek the society of white people he must have copied their ways and become an adept at their slang phrases."<sup>41</sup> This led the writer to conclude that Othello's understanding of Desdemona's use of this phrase launched his jealousy and the tragic result of the play. The moral of the story was "that women

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<sup>38</sup> "Puckerings" *Puck*, March 2, 1881.

<sup>39</sup> McConachie, 182.

<sup>40</sup> "Othello's Apology" *Puck*, May 29, 1878.

<sup>41</sup> "Desdemona," *Puck*, May 8, 1878.

should avoid slang. It is an idle thing, and much out of place. If they take to heart this truth, the Moor and the Venetians will not have died in vain.”<sup>42</sup> Whites turned to the popular Shakespearean image of Othello to joke about black sexuality and female deviance.

These notions of womanhood and their implied understandings of masculinity influenced interpretations of the performances. Critics celebrated beautiful and delicate Desdemonas. “McVicker’s Desdemona is a most exquisite cabinet picture” one playbill boasted, calling her “graceful, natural and tender.”<sup>43</sup> A playbill from Booth’s *Othello* reprinted a review from *The Commercial Advertiser* which largely celebrated his performance as “tender and manly, with that courtly display of affection which in the ages of chivalry, found no difficulty in expressing itself naturally in the presence of witnesses of either sex, and all conditions.” However, the *Advertiser* critiqued the fact that Booth was crying: “there is greatness in the Moor, even when everything within him is unhinged, that we failed to see in Mr. Booth’s frequent and convulsive weeping.”<sup>44</sup> Booth became less great and less manly because of his weeping. The new consumerism that outlined the performance of gender was thus not a peripheral contextual phenomenon, but an integral part of how the play signified to its audiences.

Indeed, the ideals of womanhood were reflected in the interpretations that literary critics had of the play. Richard Grant White reinforced values of submissive femininity in his discussion of Tommaso Salvini’s performance of Othello. White’s perception of inherent differences in men and women guided his understanding of jealousy. He downgraded as superficial a woman’s version of jealousy, while giving great power to man’s jealousy: “Othello’s jealousy is man’s jealousy, the feeling in man and that in woman, called jealousy, are

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Othello playbill, “The Stage” 27 March 1871, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>44</sup> Othello playbill, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

quite different in origin and in nature., although they have the same name. In woman the feeling arises from a supposed slight of her person.”<sup>45</sup> White’s reaction to the women’s response to Desdemona’s death further revealed the logical extension of the gender essentialism:

Nothing was more remarkable at Salvini’s admirable performance of Othello than the acquiescence of all his female auditors in the fate of Desdemona. They were sorry for the poor girl, to be sure; but they seemed to think that Desdemonas were made to be the victims of Othellos and that a man who could love in that fashion and be jealous in that style of exalted fury was rather to be pitied and admired when he smothered a woman on a misunderstanding. She should not have teased him so to take back Cassio; and what could she have expected when she was so careless about the handkerchief and told such lies about it! It is somewhat unpleasant to be smothered to be sure, but all the same she ought to be content and happy to be the object of such love and the occasion of such jealousy.<sup>46</sup>

According to this logic, Desdemona caused her own murder. Women watching the show would expect the same treatment if they were so fortunate to be loved by an Othello. Desdemona was guilty of breaking her proper role by encouraging Cassio’s reinstatement, and should be glad to suffer an “unpleasant” smothering because it indicated the strength of Othello’s love. The noble Othello acted as he should.

Others critics more directly argued that Desdemona was an example of weak womanhood. In an essay “Why Women Should Study Shakespeare” in June of 1884, J. Heard argued that Desdemona had a “rare loveliness” but “is lacking in strength of character and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

unflinching candor and honesty of soul.”<sup>47</sup> He argued that “Nature, in all of its varying phases, works in obedience to fixed and immutable laws in the wide domain in which Shakespeare traverses.”<sup>48</sup> Desdemona’s lack of character was natural for a woman. In this example, conclusions about gender, like race, were authorized through the “Shakespearean.” Desdemona’s weakness, like all women’s weakness, was revealed in the universality of Shakespeare’s works.

Nor was Shakespeare the only authority on gender. J.E. Rankin wrote that the tragedy is caused by the fact that

At the commencement of the drama Desdemona has done that which no daughter ought to be obliged to—indeed I had almost said ought to dare to do. From fear that her father will not permit her to marry Othello, she has stolen away and married him clandestinely. When God put among the ten commandments of perpetual force upon mankind, a single one enjoining honor to parents, he indicated this as the pathway of safety, as well as duty....a daughter is disobeying God when she steals away from her father’s house where she ought to be married, and have her nuptials celebrated in secret. And I regard this disobedience to her father as one of the grounds of the tragic end to which Desdemona came....when God makes a law, he looks after the penalty of breaking it and it was so in Desdemona’s case.<sup>49</sup>

In this, the second argument that Desdemona deserved the violence, God and Shakespeare are enlisted as cultural authorities to enforce proper womanhood. There was an idea that Shakespeare’s messages about gender were self-evident. Like race, they became common sense thinking among white males.

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<sup>47</sup> Othello playbill, “The Lorgnette” September 1870, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> J.E. Rankin, “The Theology of Othello” *The Independent*, February 1, 1872.

In *Desdemona: A Shakespearean Story of Jealousy* George William Gerwig came to the opposite conclusion about Desdemona.<sup>50</sup> In this series on “Shakespeare’s Ideals of Womanhood,” he argued that “it is not for his graceful diction that we prize Shakespeare most...but because he taught the men and women of the world many of their greatest lessons in living.”<sup>51</sup> Shakespeare was no longer an entertainer, but a prescriber of behavior and ethics, especially as they related to the idea of the proper woman. In the forward, Shakespeare was given credit for predicting ideal American womanhood: “in the readiness of her wit and the sunniness of her charm Shakespeare may almost be said to have discovered the American girl three hundred years before she discovered herself.”<sup>52</sup> White men used Shakespeare to confirm common sense understandings of American women. Another scholar echoed these sentiments, stating “There is hardly a play that has not a perfect woman in it, steadfast in grave hope, and errorless purpose...of Othello I need not trace the tale.”<sup>53</sup>

Though it is beyond the scope of the study to comprehensively detail women’s responses to these male depictions, it is important to note that the women who played Desdemona understood her with nuance and agency. The aforementioned Ellen Terry, for instance, was not the living embodiment of the ideal; she was an independently wealthy woman who did not acquiesce to the prescriptions of submissiveness. Charles Hiatt saw her Desdemona and declared that she “she emphasized with wonderful skill the defenceless innocence, the modesty, the tenderness, the unalterable yet artless devotion of the ill-fated heroine of Shakespeare’s tragedy.”<sup>54</sup> This view, consistent with the idealized femininity, was not how Terry understood

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<sup>50</sup> George William Gerwig, *Desdemona: A Shakespearean Story of Jealousy* (East Aurora, New York: The Roycrofters, 1929).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.8.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Hiatt, *Ellen Terry and Her Impersonations, An Appreciation* (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1972, originally published 1898), 160.

the character. According to Terry, Desdemona “was not a simpleton,” and that “it took strength” to act the part of Desdemona who was a woman with “plenty of character.”<sup>55</sup> While the developing consumer culture was indicative of certain normative gender expectations, the women who attended the theatre and acted the parts had far more agency than the advertisements and etiquette books prescribed.<sup>56</sup> Famous Shakespearean actress Sarah Bernhardt, for instance, famously acted male roles in direct opposition to this delicate femininity, and her perceived subversiveness was documented. *The New York Sun* wrote, “Sarah Bernhardt’s decision to act masculine roles because she is too old for youthful heroines and is unwilling to impersonate mothers has doubtless had its effect in turning the thoughts of other actresses in the same direction.”<sup>57</sup> The focus of the chapter has been on which consumerist messages women received in the theatre; however, they were not accepted uniformly by the women on stage or in the audience.

It is also important to pause in the discussion of gender to highlight the absence of the voices of black women. Indeed, there are few documented cases of black women commenting on *Othello* and its meanings to their identity in the two hundred year time span of this study. Perhaps this is because the play has traditionally been seen to be about a black man and a white woman. The only black woman in the play is Othello’s off-stage mother who gave him the handkerchief. It may also be due to the fact that, as doubly oppressed minorities, black women were often expected to mute individual reactions in favor of larger racial progress. This absence of documentation, however, should not indicate that black women had the same reaction to the play as the black men who used the play for racial uplift. Some women such as Fredi

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<sup>55</sup> Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 132.

<sup>56</sup> Audience response along gender lines requires more substantial study. While the focus of my study is to examine how the language created at the theatre made certain ideas, it is important to note the need to document women’s voices and responses to this culture.

<sup>57</sup> “Actresses in Men’s Roles,” *Current Literature* 30, issue 5 (May 1901): 620.

Washington did use the play to highlight the potential of black Americans in general.<sup>58</sup>

However, black women have had a complicated relationship to the play through time, as several scholars within the last forty years have demonstrated. An accompanying study of the diversity of black female responses to the play would be an important addition to this argument.

Yet, in a sense, black women were essential foils to this developing idea of idealized white womanhood. The process of defining the qualities of white femininity outlined above was inherently racialized. White womanhood was defined against the stereotypes of the degraded black woman. White women were depicted to be inherently chaste, submissive, and moral. As Cheryl Harris has effectively demonstrated, black women were “degraded, immoral, and sexually promiscuous” Jezebels; they were the licentious women with a “reckless sexual appetite.”<sup>59</sup> The elite theatre definitions of white womanhood gained clarity through comparison with black women.

#### Consuming Race and Shakespearean Correctness

Given the culture of external, consumerist, elite New York theatre, it is not surprising that performances of *Othello* were not particularly racially subversive. The theatre was not a site of racial exploration but a conserver of codes of race and gender. The delicateness of Desdemona, like the delicateness of the new female audience, depended on Othello not being black. I mentioned in chapter two that a performance of Othello in the Park theatre in 1837 led one reviewer to remark that “there were not twenty females in the respectable part of the house. Why it was so we cannot imagine, unless it is that ladies do not fancy the practical amalgamation,

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<sup>58</sup> For one contemporary response from a female perspective, see Sheila Rose Bland, “How I Would Direct Othello,” *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, edited by Mythili Kaul (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1996), 29-44

<sup>59</sup> Cheryl Harris, “Finding Sojourner’s Truth.” *Cordozo Law Review* (November 1996): 10, 11. As Harris also reveals, whiteness consolidated economic property by claiming the reproductive products of the black female body.



broad speeches and pillow smothering of this blackamoor tragedy. We don't blame them."<sup>60</sup> At the end of the century, women came to the theatre. Implied miscegenation was no longer a viable option if proper women were to be protected.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, several of the most significant performers of Othello in New York were Edwin Booth, Lawrence Barrett, Tommaso Salvini, and in the 1920s, Walter Hampden. Scholars have effectively recreated the performances of these actors and evaluated the choices that they made in comparison with one another.<sup>61</sup> Though they have been explored as artistic representations, and as broad reflections of the time period, I will focus more specifically on how they were being consumed by New York audiences to argue that reactions to the performances revealed a continuation of a white-authored Othello.

The "Shakespearean" was further commodified for the new audiences in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the masters who interpreted Shakespeare's plays presented events worthy of purchase. The Othellos of Salvini and Booth were advertised as rare experiences that would make audiences members of an elite club. "The few remaining opportunities of seeing Mr. Booth should not be lost as this is his last week of performance," one playbill insisted.<sup>62</sup> Though Salvini made numerous trips to America in the 1870s and 1880s and acted for months at a time, playbills often referred to the "Salvini Farewell Season."<sup>63</sup> Booth's and Salvini's interpretations of Othello are often discussed as diametric opposites—one cerebral

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<sup>60</sup> *Morning Herald*, August 3, 1837.

<sup>61</sup> Though Booth was more popular as an Iago, he was such a dominant figure on the New York stage that his Othello was also noteworthy. For a discussion of Booth and his performance, see Rosenberg 80-119, Winter 272-280, Matteo 218-227. Also, see: Edwina Booth Grossmann, *Edwin Booth* (New York: The Century Co., 1894), Daniel J. Watermeier, editor; *Between Actor and Critic: Selected Letters of Edwin Booth and William Winter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), Daniel J. Watermeier, editor; *Edwin Booth's Performances: The Mary Isabella Stone Commentaries* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990). For a discussion of Salvini's performance, see Hankey 56-62, Rosenberg 102-119, Vaughan, *Othello: a Contextual History*, 162-173, Matteo 218-227.

<sup>62</sup> Othello playbill, "The Stage," 28 May 1869, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>63</sup> Othello playbill, "Academy of Music," 19 February 1883, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections, was called the "Salvini Farewell."

and the other passionate- and while by all accounts Salvini's Othello was emotionally explosive, it is also important to note that they were consumed by the same audience in the same context.<sup>64</sup> The challenge of the passionate and animalistic Salvini was calmly accommodated into the larger theatre-going culture. Buying the experience was literalized by souvenir programs that were signed by the artists; one playbill, for instance, advertised that "books of Othello as performed on this occasion, containing Portraits and Autographs of Signor Salvini and Mr. Edwin Booth, can be had from Attendants."<sup>65</sup> On the front of many several playbills, the god-like image of Shakespeare rose behind a picture of Salvini and Booth, looking down on them. Audiences bought all three at the theater.<sup>66</sup>

This new Shakespeare consumerism included the sale of literary scholarship, play texts, and knowledge of Shakespearean correctness. In the playbills, there were excerpts from William Winter's biography of Edwin Booth and from Salvini's writings on *Othello*.<sup>67</sup> In addition, Salvini sold translations of his Othello as "the only authorized edition with the Italian and English text."<sup>68</sup> Opposite one of these ads was an advertisement for opera hats, which claimed that they were of "extra quality" and the "correct styles."<sup>69</sup> From hats to Shakespeare, products were more valuable when they were "correct." The sale of Shakespeare continued into the twentieth century. Forbes-Robertson, another famous English performer of Othello who traveled to New York, was advertised in a 1913 playbill at the Shubert in Othello in terms similar to

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<sup>64</sup> See, for instance, Vaughan's description of Salvini's performance.

<sup>65</sup> Othello playbill, "Academy of Music," 26 April 1886, file 6730, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>66</sup> For an account of Salvini's Othello from the perspective of a theatre-goer who watched the performance dozens of times, see Edward Tuckerman Mason: *The Othello of Tommaso Salvini* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1890). He writes in the Preface, v: "the aim of this book is to describe, fully and accurately, a great theatrical performance-perhaps the greatest of our time. As Shakespeare is to other dramatists so is Salvini to other actors; and therefore I have tried to tell how he plays Othello."

<sup>67</sup> Salvini's writings were originally printed in *Century Magazine*.

<sup>68</sup> *Salvini Othello* (New York: Seer's Engraving and Printing Establishment, 26 Union Square, N.Y.).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

Salvini: “Farewell of Forbes-Robertson (positively his Last Engagement in Greater N.Y.).”<sup>70</sup> On the ninth page of the same program, just above the scene breakdown of the play, was an ad for a restaurant that claimed that “if Shakespeare were alive tonight he would be seen at Churchill’s: The Most Comfortable and Popular Restaurant in New York.”<sup>71</sup> Perhaps the ad was tongue-in-cheek, but Shakespeare’s marketability became increasingly common. To be more elite, New Yorkers were encouraged to do what Shakespeare would do. More specifically, they were told to buy what Shakespeare would buy.

The performances also sold a non-black Othello. As discussed in chapter two, Howard Furness stated in his 1886 *Variorum* of the play that “actors now present the tawny hue.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Othello’s lack of connection to African Americans was largely supported by legitimate performances. *The Galaxy* discussed both race and gender, celebrating Irving’s Othello because he avoids the “savage-looking negro” that would have “disgusted Desdemona.”<sup>73</sup> By contrast, his was a “tawny Moor, with long, straight black hair, and a refined and noble bearing.”<sup>74</sup> He linked this to the truly Shakespearean, writing that “there can be no doubt that this gives us the true conception of Othello’s person according to all the probabilities of the case, moral and material.”<sup>75</sup> The fuzzy racial thinking (What does he mean by “moral” and “material?”) was justified by a white Shakespearean construct. According to this logic, Othello was not black because it was not the “true conception.” Edwin Booth’s *Othello* of the 1860s followed in this tradition. *The New York Times* wrote in 1867 Booth succeeds because “Othello is a supple Oriental, with a barbaric nature overlaid by a lacquer of Venetian

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<sup>70</sup> Othello playbill, “Sam S. Shubert Theatre” 16 December 1913, file 6730, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Furness 396.

<sup>73</sup> *The Galaxy* 22, Issue 1, (July 1876):148.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

refinement...Othello calls for intensity, and Mr. Booth has that. It calls for a certain dignity and poise.”<sup>76</sup> By whitening Othello, Booth could give the Moor dignity and poise. Booth himself said of Othello “I cannot possibly see the least animalism in him-to my mind he is pure and noble.”<sup>77</sup> He told one of his Desdemona’s, Ellen Terry, that he could promise that “he would never make her black.”<sup>78</sup> This, of course, was a reference to the minimal paint he used as Othello. When he touched her, his blackness would not rub off. Troubling racial issues could be disregarded because Booth’s Othello had been whitened enough not to resemble an African American.

Yet there is some evidence that performances continued to generate conflicted racial understandings among audiences. William Winter chided Irving’s Othello for being “practically black” in his appearance, using “much pigment” that often soiled Ellen Terry’s arms when she acted opposite him.<sup>79</sup> This anecdote reveals the difficulty in the performance of “race.” Henry Hudson identified the stage tradition in the exact opposite language of Furness, despite the fact that they were contemporaries. Hudson wrote that “the general custom of the stage has been to represent Othello as a full-blooded Negro.”<sup>80</sup> It is possible that Hudson watched very few performances of Othello, valuing as he did, his own interpretations that were safe for families. Regardless, conflicting ideas about Othello’s race continued to form part of the reality of New York.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> “Amusements,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 1871.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in Hankey 58.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Vaughan 172.

<sup>79</sup> Winter, *Shakespeare on the Stage*, 279.

<sup>80</sup> Rev. Henry N. Hudson, *Shakespeare’s Tragedy of Othello. The Moor of Venice with Introduction, and notes explanatory and critical for use in schools and families* (Boston: Ginn & Company 1903). It was first published in New York in 1881.

<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, like previous productions, this generation of New York artists also continued to keep lines such as “thick-lips,” and “Haply for I am black” in the performance. These lines were generally explained away as exaggerations.

Shakespearean correctness became an increasingly essential aspect of audience reception. Indeed, the new context of consumerism heightened the old discourses of white stage history and Shakespearean correctness, which continued to form the normative rubric for theatrical reception. Some lamented that productions fell short of Shakespeare's literary genius: "it is very seldom that a tragedy receives adequate illustration....this is the reason why...the student of Shakespeare so frequently abstains from the theater and pursues his studies in the solitude of his library."<sup>82</sup> Theatre-goers became students of Shakespeare who studied to judge proper performance. For instance, at the Fifth Avenue Theatre where Booth played Iago to Lawrence Barrett's *Othello*, one writer opined in the playbill that "there were a few other things that a student of Shakespeare would like to have changed in the present production of 'Othello'...Mr. Barrett's' finical tapping with the forefinger of his left hand...is not a bit of 'business' that adds dignity to the scene or illuminates the meaning."<sup>83</sup> Correctness was justified through history: "The great *Othello* of this century was Edwin Forrest, and that memory has never been eclipsed. On two or three occasions however, Edwin Booth has played *Othello* as well as it could ever have been played, and with a more complete fidelity to Shakespeare's conception than has been observed in any other contemporary embodiment of it."<sup>84</sup> The writer did not elaborate on what he meant by "complete fidelity to Shakespeare's conception," but it enabled his authority nonetheless. Fidelity could be correct line readings or correct portrayals of race and gender. Despite the fact that what was considered "Shakespearean" was a changing and functional construct, its discursive power continued to shape reactions to productions of *Othello*. This same writer spoke of Salvini's *Othello* with similar evaluation: "if it is not Shakespeare's *Othello*, and

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<sup>82</sup> *Othello* playbill, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>83</sup> *Othello* playbill, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>84</sup> *Othello* playbill, "Broadway Theatre" 14 March 1891, file 6730, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

few rational persons who know and reverence Shakespeare's works will admit that it is, it is Salvini's Othello."<sup>85</sup> By saying a performance was Shakespearean, the writer could call it legitimate; calling it non-Shakespearean justified its marginalization. Now these concepts of correctness were embedded in the very material audiences had in their hands when they sat down to watch the show.

At these new theaters, writers continued to celebrate American Shakespearean tradition to outline acceptable white performance. *The Galaxy* claimed that despite the fact that the German actor Dawison was "highly commended" for "his rendering of what is known as the 'handkerchief scene,'" they did not know that "Dawison's method of acting the scene is not new, Mr. Forrest having long since presented it."<sup>86</sup> Biographies and remembrances of Forrest and Kean were present in numerous periodicals and often affirmed their supremacy in Othello. One such magazine reported that Kean's Othello "was unsurpassable" in certain scenes, adding "in the great third act, none who remember him, will, I think be prepared to allow that he ever had, or is likely to have, an equal."<sup>87</sup> E.L. Davenport was said to have presented an Othello that "ranks with the traditional masterpieces of histrionic art."<sup>88</sup> Lawrence Barrett wrote an essay on Forrest to counter Alger's biography, outlining qualities that he perceived to be absent from the current American theatre: "Mr. Forrest was admirably fitted to carry forward the traditions of the stage as they descended to him. He was their best exponent while he lived, and their splendor in a measure faded with him."<sup>89</sup> For Barrett, Forrest was more than a great actor, but a representative of a great kind of human being: "to the indolent and unworthy his wrath was

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> "Some of Our Actors," *The Galaxy* 5, Issue 2 (February 1868): 165.

<sup>87</sup> "Edmund Kean," *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* 25, Issue 4 (April 1877): 414.

<sup>88</sup> Othello playbill, "Music Hall" 3 November 1875, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>89</sup> Lawrence Barrett, "Edwin Forrest: An Actor's Estimate of a Great Artist," *The Galaxy* 24, Issue 4 (New York 1877): 526-528.

sudden and unsparing; to the earnest student he was as gentle as a child....many have striven to possess themselves of the cast-off robes of the dead king. But how shrunken and shriveled do their lean anatomies appear in those ample garments.”<sup>90</sup> To play Othello was to be evaluated in the context of great men; Forrest and Kean stood as two geniuses for comparison. By the turn of the century, Salvini and Booth were added to the long line of great Othellos. The history mattered because it established a standard of excellence and correctness that formed the rubric against which African American voices struggled. The language affirming this white history was found throughout the playbills. By purchasing the event, the audience became part of this shrinking club of white exclusivity.

That this was a consciously white Othello being created is revealed in reactions to perceived racial attributes in certain performances. Though largely celebrated, Salvini’s Othello was critiqued when it appeared to exhibit characteristics associated with the non-Shakespearean, which itself was often racialized. In an essay in *Shakespeariana; A Critical and Contemporary Review of Shakespearian Literature*, the author criticizes the racial implications of the performance, writing that he “would rather [Salvini] were less oriental and more Shakespearian in his death. The picturesque curved knife hacking terribly at his neck instead of the sudden stab at his breast of the concealed dagger adds an unnecessary emphasis.”<sup>91</sup> He constructs the idea of “Shakespearean” around an idea of race; the Oriental is not the Shakespearean.

An 1873 *New York Times* review used Shakespearean correctness to more explicitly authorize a common sense racial understanding of Salvini’s Othello. The critic responded to Salvini’s Othello, complaining that he “makes him a negro. The peculiar features of that race are not thrust violently upon us, it is true: but still, there they are; Desdemona’s love is an undeniable

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> “The Drama,” *Shakespeariana; A Critical and Contemporary Review of Shakespearian Literature* (May 1, 1886): 232. This publication was funded by the New York Shakespeare Society.

wooly-headed negro. This, we may be sure, was not Shakespeare's conception of Othello."<sup>92</sup> This negative reaction demonstrates the threat posed by the embodiment of a perceived American blackness in the context of a culturally elite Shakespearean performance. The review went on to justify the criticism by differentiating the Moor from the blackamoor, arguing that Shakespeare's noble Othello was necessarily unlike the African-American. The author relied on an assumption of Shakespearean correctness to make his critique: it was not "Shakespeare's conception," but Salvini's manipulation that made Othello black. "The Shakespearean" authorized whiteness by disconnecting blackness from Othello's heroism. By contrast, *The New York Times* wrote that "Booth's Othello was the very spirit of Venice. It was the Middle Ages. It was the Orient. It was all that is delicious in the land of gold and pearl-of silks from Damascus, perfumes from Persia. It was Moorish."<sup>93</sup> Booth's Othello was about an imagined culture; it became one of the exotic products being sold next to the cast list in the playbills. He later added that "Booth's was much more Shakespeare's conception than is Salvini's. The Othello of Salvini is a mighty thing, but it is Salvini's."<sup>94</sup> Grace Greenwood later echoed this loss, stating that Shakespeare's "noble Moor disappeared" in Salvini's violent interpretation.<sup>95</sup> The violent and emotional Salvini may have been popular, but what he embodied was not Shakespearean. During these years "the Shakespearean" became more exclusive and narrowly racialized.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the study of Shakespeare as a literary figure became a lucrative business and a competitive academic pursuit.<sup>96</sup> White stage interpretations of the play were reinforced by a literary culture that approached Shakespeare with formal intellectual

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<sup>92</sup> *The New York Times*. September 17, 1873.

<sup>93</sup> "Actors and Actresses," *New York Times*, June 20, 1875.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Grace Greenwood, "Notes from Over the Sea," *New York Times*, September 6, 1875.

<sup>96</sup> In 1872 Shakespeare's statue in New York's Central Park was donated with the inscription: "The Master of Our Thought, the Land's first Citizen."



rigor.<sup>97</sup> Dozens of Shakespeare societies popped up on the East Coast, allowing the new theatre-goers access to Shakespearean knowledge that deepened the experience of performance.<sup>98</sup>

Journals such as *Shakespeareana* furthered the literary study of Othello through monthly essays on Shakespeare's text and imagery, complete with biographical anecdotes about the author.

Versions of Shakespeare's plays were now sold to an audience that included school children who needed to study the great dramatist and housewives who could learn from his moral teachings.

Hudson's editions were advertised at the theatre as "annotated for use in schools and families."<sup>99</sup> There was an interest in first editions and there was debate about whether

Shakespeare is best understood in the library or on the stage. He was translated in numerous languages. Richard Grant White and Henry Hudson continued to publish their essays on and editions of Shakespeare in New York periodicals. The work of other intellectual giants such as Horace Howard Furness, A.C. Bradley and William Winter influenced performance and set standards for interpretation.

Winter's scholarship in particular revealed the degree to which the notion of Shakespearean correctness affected interpretation of the plays. Correctness moved further into the experience of the event; Winter was a popular critic whose words were read by the new audiences at the theatre. In judging the major performances of *Othello* from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century, Winter identified the intellectual and noble Othello as the Shakespearean, and the emotional, foreign and savage Othello as the non-Shakespearean. John McCullough was largely celebrated, for instance, for having "power solidity, elevation, passion,

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<sup>97</sup> Though I do not give it as much focus as in previous chapters, it is important to revisit scholarship surrounding the play to illustrate the continuation, even intensification of the discourses outlined in earlier chapters. The notion of Shakespearean correctness, the whitened Othello, and stage white history was given new form and importance in the consumerist elite Shakespeare.

<sup>98</sup> See for examples Othello playbill, "Wallack's Theatre" 2 November 1875, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections, and Othello playbill, "The Lorgnette" September 1870.

<sup>99</sup> Othello playbill, "Booth's Theatre," New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

pathos, manly grace, competent vocalism, and fluent continuity of artistic treatment,” which resulted in making “his impersonation of Othello...among the best dramatic achievements of our time.”<sup>100</sup> The only critique was in his dresses which were “Oriental, not Venetian... therefore they were incorrect.”<sup>101</sup> Winter famously disliked Salvini, and more vehemently the other Italians who came to New York, because they did not fulfill his ideas of the Shakespearean. He wrote of Salvini that he failed because he spoke Italian and was consequently “obstructed by his lack of a full understanding of the conceptions of the English poet.”<sup>102</sup> Salvini was guilty of promoting a “plebian” Othello that was “completely foreign to Othello, as drawn by Shakespeare.”<sup>103</sup> Winter was harsher with Ernesto Rossi whose Othello he described as “radically wrong and supremely repulsive,” falling deadly short of the “true ideal of Shakespeare’s conception.”<sup>104</sup> William Winter complained of Rossi’s Othello that “his Othello is of Italian conception and of Italian mechanism...the basis of the work is animal...his Moor is a person of common nature, who is first intoxicated with sensual love and afterward infuriated with demoniac jealousy.”<sup>105</sup> This, he concluded was “unpoetic, un-Shakespearean, and unpleasant.”<sup>106</sup> According to Winter, the Shakespearean qualities of Othello were not those of the savage animal, but the poetic hero. Shakespeare was thus constructed as further away from the stereotype of savage blackness. Winter rants for many more pages about Novelli and is particularly offended that Novelli gave acting advice. Novelli was “not satisfied to present his perversions of Shakespeare and allow them to stand for what they were.”<sup>107</sup> With a xenophobic

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<sup>100</sup> Winter, 285.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 288.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 297, 295.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Othello playbill, “Booth’s Theatre,” 31 October 1881, file 6729, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Winter., 303.

flair, Winter conserves the American idea of Shakespeare, writing “the American community, as a whole, naturally regards as an impertinence the top-lofty attitudes of foreign visitors to the American Stage who assume to dispense instruction as to the function of dramatic art and the meaning of English dramatic literature.”<sup>108</sup> The appeal to Shakespearean correctness gave Winter the authority to promote white American ownership of true Shakespearean embodiment. It was when actors seemed less white that they became less Shakespearean.

Winter’s scholarship conserved Shakespearean whiteness. In his “various mention” section in which he noted that Robert Bruce Mantell was playing Othello (in 1911) with a splendid “martial authority, innate dignity, simplicity of mind, and a sweet, confiding magnanimity.”<sup>109</sup> His interpretation was formed by “close study and severe practice, on the English provincial stage, at a time when the influence of “the old school of actors...had not perished.” Mantell’s non-savage and traditional Othello is juxtaposed with Ira Aldridge, whose presence in the text is justified in the following way: “mention should be made, as of a curiosity of Ira Aldridge.” Winter conceded that he seemed to be “a man of talent,” but that “probably his performance of Othello attracted particular attention and was considered the more remarkable because of his being a Negro.”<sup>110</sup> Winter thus affirmed the traditional Mantell while downplaying the success of Aldridge, surmising that his success was overstated due to his being a black person. Mantell is of the “old school;” Aldridge is “a curiosity.” The legitimate Shakespearean continued to be defined in opposition to blackness. Now correctness had moved into mainstream audience reception, further defining the nature of the play-going experience.

### Conclusion

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 306.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 311.

This white elitist world was imaginary, and only that. As mentioned, Booth's Othello was about an invented other that was bought and sold like the products in the playbills. Nevertheless, the creation of this world had real consequences. Shakespeare was the property of certain white New Yorkers who had the education and money to buy him. The romanticized ethnicities were not real; however, by defining the correct Shakespearean through the white upper class imagination, whites excluded black New Yorkers from Shakespeare's cultural capital, economic possibilities, and perceived messages of universal humanity.

The black resistance outlined in chapter three and the culture of consumerism and Shakespearean correctness described in this chapter met in the Robeson performance. Paul Robeson played Othello as a black man, emphasized black history in his speeches, claimed Shakespeare's authority in his interviews, and politicized the performance as a significant civil rights event for African Americans. The production and its reception were born from both contexts. Because of this, Robeson's performance was a civil rights achievement and it did not end whiteness in the theatre. It offered hope to black New Yorkers and reinforced stereotypes of simple and savage blackness.

## CHAPTER 5: PAUL ROBESON: PROGRESS AND REINVENTED WHITENESS

Scholars do not spare superlatives in their descriptions of Paul Robeson's 1943 Broadway *Othello*. In his biography on Robeson Martin Duberman calls it "a racial event of the first magnitude."<sup>1</sup> Lois Potter states that "the modern performance history of *Othello* begins with Paul Robeson, whose mere presence transformed and re-politicized the play."<sup>2</sup> In the 2001 *The Cambridge History of American Theatre* the editors remark that "with this performance Robeson claimed *Othello* for future generations of African Americans to play *Othello* in America."<sup>3</sup> The narrative typically celebrates Robeson as a black and noble Shakespearean hero who boldly kissed a white woman in public and proved the artistic and intellectual capacity of an entire race.

Yet troubling questions remain unanswered in these sweeping depictions. If Robeson so successfully claimed *Othello* for blacks, for instance, why did whites continue to play the role? Why did Laurence Olivier give one of the most famous twentieth century performances of *Othello* in dark minstrel face twenty years later? Why did a black man not play *Othello* on film until thirty years after Olivier? Scholarship on Paul Robeson's performance of *Othello* in 1943 tends to omit contextual cultural history in favor of a celebratory narrative that focuses on one man's heroism. In her recent dissertation on Paul Robeson's three performances of *Othello*, soon to be published as a book, Lindsey Swindall writes that Robeson "broke the color barrier on Broadway in *Othello*" in a performance "which fully animated both his artistic and political aims."<sup>4</sup> What does it mean to say that Robeson "broke the color barrier?" Blacks had performed

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 279.

<sup>2</sup> Lois Potter, *Shakespeare in Performance: Othello* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Bigsby and Don B. Wilmeth (editors) *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Volume II 1870-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), 481.

<sup>4</sup> Lindsey R. Swindall, dissertation, *The Intersections of Theatrics and Politics: The Case of Paul Robeson and Othello*, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (Ann Arbor: Proquest Information and Learning Company, 2007), 94, 95. Swindall's dissertation is a well-researched study of the performances, but has a clear agenda to portray the performance in a solely heroic light. The ambitious collection of evidence is manipulated to celebrate Robeson. While I agree with the basic premise, the evidence often contradicts the argument.

on Broadway before; playwrights Langston Hughes and Richard Wright had seen their plays performed on the “great white way” and Robeson himself starred on Broadway in an interracial performance of *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* two decades previously.<sup>5</sup> Was this performance so significant because it was a play by Shakespeare, because it was so successful, or because Robeson played a noble black man who kissed a white woman on stage? When narratives are not contextualized they run the risk of obscuring continued racism and the efforts of the larger black community.

The performance did not eliminate racist understandings of the black Othello. In 1958 M.R. Ridley famously wrote in his esteemed Arden edition of *Othello* that “Othello should be imagined in reading, and presented on the stage, as a coal-black, a negro.” What this meant to him, however, was that Othello should not be “of the particular negroid type which Coleridge presumably had in mind when he spoke of a “veritable negro.”<sup>6</sup> Ridley’s disturbing description of the “negro conductor” who possessed “one of the finest heads I have ever seen on any human being” with “lips slightly thicker than an ordinary European’s” should give us pause when discussing the transformation that occurred with Robeson.<sup>7</sup> If anything, these comments indicate continuity with nineteenth century literary scholarship, not a break from it. In the guise of being unprejudiced, Ridley repeats the tropes of biological racial classification and extends the discussion of romantic racialism. By not engaging with the racism Robeson encountered, the conflicted racialized reactions of white audiences, and the continued prejudice against black Shakespeareans, scholars prematurely end the story of white supremacy in the American theatre.

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<sup>5</sup> Langston Hughes saw his *Mulatto* run for an impressive 373 performances from 1935 to 1936. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* ran for 114 performances in 1941. Paul Robeson’s performance as Jim Harris in O’Neill’s play ran on Broadway from May to October of 1924.

<sup>6</sup> M.R. Ridley, editor, *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare Othello, Seventh Edition* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1958), Introduction, liii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. li.

Ridley and other whites who continued to publish the majority of Shakespearean writings still held authorship of Othello's meanings, maintaining ownership of Shakespeare's cultural capital. Recent scholarship that mistakes the history or paints a solely celebratory narrative of Robeson runs the risk of brushing aside racism and the continued manifestations of whiteness in Shakespeare.

Further, the Robeson narrative is indicative of a larger problem among theatre historians. In textbooks and mainstream historical studies, black theatre history is too often written as an add-on story of heroes.<sup>8</sup> It is about an evil but poorly understood white racism that is overcome by the effort of individuals. It is segregated from white theatre history. It does not investigate how communities of whites and blacks used the theatre to self-define along racial lines. Paul Robeson's New York performance of Othello in 1943-1944 has received extensive popular and scholarly attention, but many of the narratives written about it typify this kind of segregated academic thinking. It is often through Robeson's performance, for instance, that mainstream theatre historians encounter the American black Shakespearean.<sup>9</sup> He is studied as a heroic man who changed the way people think about Shakespeare, black performance, and the black race. Like Jackie Robinson, Robeson's Othello is therefore still remembered in February.<sup>10</sup>

Errol Hill has long since demonstrated that many black voices contributed to a complicated black response to Shakespearean production. This chapter's revision places a primacy on some of those voices within the African American community whose sustained rejection of white ownership of Shakespeare gives the Robeson performance a new context and a

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<sup>8</sup> There are, of course, numerous exceptions to this rule. The scholars who have influenced my approach to this subject include Errol Hill, Shane White, Joyce Green MacDonald, Kathy Perkins, David Krasner, Harry Elam, and James Hatch.

<sup>9</sup> Several textbooks also include a paragraph on Ira Aldridge's experience in Europe.

<sup>10</sup> Now Robeson is largely remembered as a hero. For a generation, his perceived communist activities made him a pariah in both the black and the white community. As recently as early October of 2010, a group of students at Rutgers initiated a fight to get Robeson's name removed from the library because of his connection to communism and Joseph Stalin.

renewed significance. While certain scholars have quoted from or referred to reviews of the performance in black periodicals, including the *New York Amsterdam News*, *The Crisis*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The New York Age*, *The People's Voice*, and *Opportunity*, their analysis is not connected to black history, nor to the larger significance of the play in Harlem. In chapter three, I argued that the black community began to use *Othello* to gain legitimacy, reverse minstrelsy, and co-opt the authority of Shakespeare. Robeson did not invent this challenge, but was the star who gave the ideas a bigger audience.

In the midst of this significant resistance, I analyze the language used in mainstream white responses to Robeson to argue that whiteness was recreated during and after his performance of *Othello*. Virginia Mason Vaughan, Lois Potter, and Martin Duberman have initiated a valuable discussion on the racism exhibited by the production's director Margaret Webster in her understanding of the play. Vaughan, for instance, argues that Webster could not "escape the late nineteenth century's racial thinking about *Othello*."<sup>11</sup> I expand the discussion on the nature of this racism by investigating how romantic racialism was embedded in the language of artists and reviewers and in the consumption of the play event itself. Like literary criticism, the elite purchase of Robeson's *Othello* revealed continuity in the sale of Shakespeare on the Broadway stage that muted the radical potential of the event.<sup>12</sup> The performance did not accomplish what blacks hoped for at the time, nor did it erase racism against black Shakespeareans. While this conclusion is in itself not revelatory, I hope to uncover how the language used by critics and practitioners buoyed a particular kind of whiteness that continues to infect the American theatre. Indeed, the whiteness of the 1940s had different characteristics than

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<sup>11</sup> Vaughan, *Othello: a Contextual History*, 195.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted, however, that the audience attending this performance was by all accounts more racially diverse. To characterize the performance as solely a white event would be as flawed as to depict it as a completely integrated experience.



it did during the time of Ira Aldridge. Paul Robeson and the black community challenged both racism against blacks and an insidious liberal whiteness that accommodated romanticized blackness into an ideology of white supremacy.

One question guided both white and black journalists discussing *Othello* from 1930-1943: Did Shakespeare intend for an authentically black actor to perform the role? The discourse of Shakespearean correctness and the tacit authorization of racial ideologies that it supported characterized many of the responses to Robeson's *Othello*. The conclusions drawn by both whites and blacks conferred power and privilege because New Yorkers had loved Shakespeare for generations. There was a two hundred year history of legitimizing ideologies by divining Shakespearean intents. This culture of authorization intensified in these years as Shakespeare was further established in public schools, academia, and the legitimate theatre. Evidence suggests that much of the white audience who reacted positively to Robeson's *Othello* was still not ready to accept him as an equal. The 1943 Shakespeare performance legitimized him, but only for a time. When Robeson would later be accused of radical communist activity, he was no longer appealing. As Errol Hill has written, the performance hoped to usher in "a new era of hope for the black Shakespearean actor." According to Hill, "such regrettably was not the case."<sup>13</sup>

And some African-Americans knew it was not the case even in 1944. At the end of the chapter, I turn to the voice of Langston Hughes whose character "Jesse Simple" detailed the inherent flaws in making the black *Othello* a symbol for the entire race. While most black journalists concluded that Robeson's performance was a triumph for black civil rights, Simple summarizes his response to the production with three words: "I was ashamed." Uncovering the

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<sup>13</sup> Hill. *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors*, 130.

nature of this “shame” places additional cautionary limits on the narrative of social transformation associated with Robeson’s *Othello*.

#### Othello and Black New York before Broadway 1930-1942

Before it was even performed, black New Yorkers claimed ownership of Robeson’s 1930 London performance of *Othello*. The 1930 performance in England at the Savoy Theatre and 1943-1944 performance on Broadway are usually discussed as separate artistic events representing different stages in Robeson’s career, analyzed on the basis of theatrical choice or to highlight different understandings of race in England and the United States. Scholars tend to stress difference instead of continuity. Julie Hankey notes that in 1930 “racial prejudice in America made it unthinkable for Robeson to perform Shakespeare there as it had been for Ira Aldridge a century before.”<sup>14</sup> Swindall’s dissertation separates the performances by chapter, connecting them biographically, but not within the context of the black community. Other studies focus on artistic choices and do not detail what was happening in black New York during these years. I argue that the London performance had a significant impact in New York because Robeson and the black community made it a statement of civil rights. Hankey may be correct that Robeson’s *Othello* would have been unthinkable in the white community in 1930, but for black New Yorkers, the performance was a necessary lens through which to view American racism. The New York black community did not wait for racism to fade, but fought it with interpretations of Shakespeare and with all-black performances of *Othello*. Robeson’s English *Othello* was from the beginning connected to larger issues affecting the African American community. Robeson’s London performance was thus not a moment of heroism abroad, but a shining example within in a tradition of action in New York.

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<sup>14</sup> Julie Hankey, editor, *Shakespeare in Production: Othello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 69.

In black New York, Paul Robeson's *Othello* was a statement of civil rights as early as 1929. Before he ever attempted the role, the performance was already celebrated within black history alongside Ira Aldridge and Frederick Douglass. Continuing to locate Robeson in a history of black success, *The New York Amsterdam News* reported on his coming performance in London:

Aldridge's 'Othello' will live in the minds of men as long as civilization lasts, and if Douglass had done no more than deliver that remarkable address on an occasion which he helped to make auspicious at Rochester, he would have made a contribution to the world which so many proclaiming themselves leaders, both black and white, would do well to follow. And so we have Paul Robeson....his first appearance next year in London in the title role of Shakespeare's "Othello" will be a first night seldom witnessed even in the land which has contributed so much to the world of art and letters.<sup>15</sup>

Robeson expanded the narrative of black achievement by continuing the work of his predecessors. For generations, Americans had tried to gain respect as actors by performing Shakespeare in his native country. Vaughan wrote that "Robeson was legitimized as an actor" in this performance "making possible his Broadway success."<sup>16</sup> Though it was in England, the *New York Amsterdam News* wrote that it was about black New York: "Shall those of us who love this man be constrained to gaze upon him from afar and be denied the right to shout: Well done, Paul. We will not! Harlem will rise in her might and proclaim: He is one of us and one of whom we are very proud."<sup>17</sup> The paper later announced that "the triumphs of a member of a minority people like Robeson's bring honor not merely to himself, but to his race as well."<sup>18</sup> Robeson's

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<sup>15</sup> "The Return of Robeson," *The New York Amsterdam News*, October 16, 1929.

<sup>16</sup> Vaughan, *Othello: a Contextual History*, 182.

<sup>17</sup> "The Return of Robeson," *The New York Amsterdam News*, October 16, 1929.

<sup>18</sup> "Paul Robeson," *The New York Amsterdam News*, January 8, 1930.

London performance, like the reports of Aldridge's *Othello* abroad, was seen to be about the daily struggles of blacks in Harlem.

Robeson the actor was celebrated as one of the great Othellos, while Robeson the man was lauded for his work to advance black civil rights. The New York paper *The Negro World* had several short articles on Paul Robeson's 1930 *Othello*. Robeson's achievement in *Othello* was communicated to the black community in the short essay by Darold L. Lewis, "Laud Robeson as Othello," for instance, which quoted the *London Morning Post*: "there has been no Othello on our stage for 40 years to compare with him."<sup>19</sup> Theatrical success was never far removed from racial concerns. Lewis later wrote that "Robeson feels Sting of London Jim Crow" detailing how Robeson had to endure segregated seating while attending a London theater. Robeson succeeded in the legitimate world while simultaneously revealing its flaws. Though Robeson was gaining legitimacy in a white theatrical world, he was still seen as a "race man." Indeed, Lewis wrote that "Paul Robeson is Not a White Man's Negro, He is Indeed a New Negro."<sup>20</sup> Contrasting him with Booker T. Washington, Lewis writes: "Booker Washington....belonged to the ancient tradition which kept his hat off and said "sir" to men who addressed him...Robeson is a Northern Negro brought up on different fare...he was not only the king of Harlem. He was free all over town."<sup>21</sup> Robeson's *Othello* was thus from the beginning positioned as a statement both within and against white theatrical norms. Paul Robeson was a member of the community of black New York despite the fact that he was in London. His successes in *Othello* became the successes of Harlem.

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<sup>19</sup> Darold L. Lewis, "Laud Robeson as Othello," *The Negro World*, May 31, 1930.

<sup>20</sup> Darold L. Lewis, "Paul Robeson is Not a White Man's Negro, He is Indeed a New Negro," *The Negro World*, July 12, 1930.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Robeson performed dignity in the black press in direct contrast to the debasing images of black criminal performance in the white press. A New York connection to Robeson's performance was encouraged through printed photographs. *The New York Amsterdam News* showed a well-dressed Robeson in his interracial London cast with the text "Paul Robeson, famous American Negro tenor and dramatic star, goes over his part as Othello with other stage notables, appearing in this week's opening production of the Shakespearean play."<sup>22</sup> The image made real the story of Robeson's legitimacy. Robeson's studious physical presence was the antithesis of the image of the criminal Othello working in chains.<sup>23</sup> While the white press conflated the black Othello and real-life violence, the black press conflated the black Othello with the intelligent and talented real-life hero, Paul Robeson.

Discussion of Robeson's Othello continued in the black community even after his Savoy performance closed, often focusing on the immanency of a New York showing. In 1936, for example, *The New York Amsterdam News* headlined a story called "Robeson Plans for American Othello" that stated "Mr. Robeson informed interviewers that the dreamed-of-production of "Othello "with Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, could be seen for a near future American showing."<sup>24</sup> Though this was seven years before it would happen, it revealed that Robeson's Othello lived in imagined possibilities of black New York well before being realized on Broadway.

Robeson himself used the discourse of correctness to argue that Shakespeare meant for Othello to be black. He addressed America about his London Othello through a 1930 radio address, some of which was reprinted in *The New York Amsterdam News*. Robeson discussed the possibility of a New York production during this address, remarking, "from all I hear, the

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<sup>22</sup> "Star Prepares to Act "Othello," *The New York Amsterdam News* 21 May 1930, 9.

<sup>23</sup> "Pictorial Shakespeare," *Life* 30 May 1889, 320.

<sup>24</sup> "Robeson Plans for American Othello," *The New York Amsterdam News*, January 18, 1936.

present production will come to America...I certainly do hope to play 'Othello' in the land of my birth, especially in New York, the scene of my first artistic endeavors."<sup>25</sup> Robeson's understanding of a black New York Othello was not inconceivable, but inevitable. Like John Bruce and others in the New Negro movement, Robeson undermined the correctness of a white Othello:

In Shakespeare's time I feel there was no great distinction between the Moor and the brown or black...most of the Moors have Ethiopian blood and come from African and to Shakespeare's mind he was called a blackamoor...it is not changed until the time of Edmund Kean, some time about the middle of the nineteenth century...when he became brown, and I feel that had to do with the fact that at that time Africa was the slave center of the world and people had at the time forgotten the ancient glory of the Ethiopian.

Further than that, in the play we have references to the sooty black boson of Othello, to his thick lips to Desdemona's name being begrimed and black as Othello's own face.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps unconsciously, Robeson challenged the foundations of the white Othello. First of all, Robeson called on Shakespeare to legitimize the performance of the black Othello, referencing the script and arguing that the bard did not make the racial distinctions that ill-informed white artists made. Secondly, he directly indicted what he saw as a mistaken tradition of whitened Shakespeare begun by Edmund Kean. The bronzed Kean, he argued, was influenced not by the true Shakespearean, but by the prejudice of slavery. Through this account of stage history, Robeson, like others in the New Negro movement, helped redefine the Shakespearean by arguing that it was the black Othello that was Shakespeare's Othello. For Robeson, proof of this came from the fact that blackness made the play itself more dramaturgically coherent. Robeson

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<sup>25</sup> "Robeson Tells Over Radio How it Feels to Play Role of 'Othello,'" *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 11, 1930.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

commented that the common contemporary critique that Othello's jealousy is not credible given his otherwise noble character arises from the mistaking Othello's race. The misunderstanding arose because Othello "is not presented as of a different race as Shakespeare intended, so he feels himself quite apart from the Venetian."<sup>27</sup> He was doing what Shakespeare "intended." Through his understanding of Shakespearean correctness, Robeson authorized a theatrical reading and a cultural ideology.

Black New York agreed with Robeson. In the press, the legitimacy of the black Othello was often clarified by the incorrectness, abnormality, and even humor of white Othellos. In a searing criticism of white actor Walter Huston's Othello, J.A. Rogers of *The New York Amsterdam News* identified what he perceived to be a common mistake among white Shakespeareans: "'Othello' is now being played in Colorado on the stage by Walter Huston, noted movie actor. As usual in America, Huston appears in white-face, in flagrant violation of Shakespeare, who clearly created Othello a Negro."<sup>28</sup> Rogers intensified the support of a black Othello. The white Othello was not simply against what "Shakespeare intended," but was "a flagrant violation" of his art. The headline of the article, "Shakespeare's Othello Turns White on Stage," implicitly argued that the white Othello was abnormal. White Othellos were the constructed distortion and black Othellos were the natural expression. The "white-face" performance was out of sync with Shakespeare's intentions. And for Rogers, it was funny to see the stupidity of this white racism. "Once in Chicago" he recalled, "I had a huge laugh seeing Benson, the noted English actor playing the part in lily-white face, while repeating the words 'sooty boson,' 'thick lips' and similar phrases in which Othello describes himself, and the white audience, evidently of the intellectual elite applauded its critical faculties as thick as concrete

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> J.A. Rogers, "Ruminations," *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 21, 1934.

from colour prejudice.” Like Rogers, others depicted the white Othello as unnatural; one brief description of Curtis Cooksey’s Othello headlined “Curtis Cooksey, white, Cast in Role of Noble Moor at Downtown Theatre.”<sup>29</sup> The performance suffered, the author argued because “a white man was performing a role which would have been better suited to a Negro actor.”<sup>30</sup> Several black voices helped destabilize the normativity of the white Othello.

To further their redefinition of the black Othello, writers employed stage history, Shakespearean correctness, and the belief that Shakespeare was not a racist. For Rogers, the mistaken understandings of Othello revealed key issues of societal racism and economic disparity. Calling on black history, he criticized complacent blacks with the power to alter the narrative of the past:

Aldridge is generally said to be the greatest of all Othellos. But the penetration of American color prejudice into England has injected the color-line into Shakespeare....Most learned white men know as much of Negro History as a Holy Roller knows of the Einstein theory. And because they know nothing and don’t want to know anything, they say there no such animal. But why pick on the white scholars? Many of the Negro professors and teachers, not to mention preachers, who were ground out of the same machine and taught to accept as infallible everything white handed to them are no different. Both types are tools of the same economic system which exploits Negroes by endeavoring to rob them of human dignity.<sup>31</sup>

According to this argument, both whites and blacks were getting the stage history of Othello history wrong. Essential to Rogers’s idea was that this writing was not simply unjust, and based in “prejudice,” but also incorrect. He indicted them on their own terms by arguing that they were

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<sup>29</sup> “Group Players Give Othello” *The New York Amsterdam News*, April 5, 1933.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



morally wrong as racists and academically wrong as scholars. *Othello* thus provided one entry point for a discussion of inaccuracies in flawed white history and for a larger discussion of racial injustice.<sup>32</sup>

African American writers invoked Shakespeare's text and authority in support of their cause. Rogers argued that the white audience projected racism on the text, while he went "to the original source for the truth."<sup>33</sup> His approach stood in contrast to white scholars whom he sarcastically chides: "Why bother about facts when an ounce of prejudice can outweigh a ton of them?"<sup>34</sup> This racism infected the quality of their work. "Some of the leading Shakespearean scholars," Rogers critiqued, "their brains muddled by capitalistic color hokum, insisted that a Moor was not a Negro."<sup>35</sup> Like black writers the decade before, Rogers reversed the humor of minstrelsy by making white racism the joke. By authorizing the black *Othello*, he indicted white stage tradition and an ideology that limited the potential of black Americans.

Rogers was one of the strongest voices in his description of a non-racist Shakespeare but others participated in this growing discourse of black resistance. Carter G. Woodson celebrated the lack of racism displayed by Shakespeare in *Othello* in an essay in *The Journal of Negro History*. Woodson wrote: "Shakespeare in thus projecting a man in black upon the screen showed that he believed in equality not only of the blacks, but of all men."<sup>36</sup> Woodson created the true "Shakespearean" as defined by inclusiveness; Shakespeare supported black civil rights.

In black New York, Paul Robeson's 1930 *Othello* was often seen as an indictment of American race relations. One headline read that in contrast to England "American Whites would

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<sup>32</sup> This was not the only time Rogers wrote about the issue. He also used similar language to discuss *Othello*'s race and the humor of white racism in the essay "Without Prejudice" in *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 2, 1933.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> C.G. Woodson, "Some Attitudes in English Literature" *The Journal of Negro History* 20, Issue 1 (January 1935): 40.

Bar Robeson: Appearance of Negro Artist in Othello Displeases Them.”<sup>37</sup> While England could accept interracial relationships, America lagged behind them. Others critiqued the depictions of blackness that were seen on Broadway to highlight Robeson’s achievement. A pastor at St. James Presbyterian Church critiqued the popular play “Green Pastures” for its depiction of black spirituality: “It seems to bring out that the primitive side of religion belongs wholly to the Negro...the play does not properly interpret the soul of the Negro.”<sup>38</sup> In contrast to this performance, the preacher celebrated the “revival of ‘Othello’” in London and the success that Paul Robeson had made in the title role.”<sup>39</sup> Shakespeare’s *Othello* was to be celebrated, but *Green Pastures* showed only the “white man’s view” of the “Negro.”<sup>40</sup> Because of its legitimacy and success in England, Robeson’s London Othello was able to stand as a foil to the U.S. depictions of blacks that reinforced debilitating stereotypes.

The black press also reported on Robeson’s use of Othello as a platform for the celebration of black culture. In an article called “‘Be Yourself’,” Advice of Robeson to Negroes,” Robeson stated that the African American “should stop trying to get away from his folk background.”

Some members of my race want to forget how to sing spirituals. They prefer not to be reminded of their ancestral folk ways. They don’t like such a play as “The Emperor Jones” and they probably wouldn’t have liked my London Othello if they had seen him chased all over the stage by Iago. There is no good reason for this. There will not be a

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<sup>37</sup> *The New York Amsterdam News*, May 21, 1930.

<sup>38</sup> “‘Green Pastures’ Called One-Sided,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 2, 1930.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

great American Negro composer until one appears who will turn back to folk materials, and indeed, to African rhythms.<sup>41</sup>

Far from being an example of black culture acquiescing to the white standards of legitimacy, Paul Robeson used his fame from *Othello* to affirm black folk culture. Robeson did not advocate that black America should seek legitimacy in white society, but that they should develop their own voices. As *Othello* was claimed by more in Harlem, his story was reframed to speak directly to the experience of black Americans.

In the early 1940s, Robeson's London *Othello* was mentioned anecdotally in an article that deftly positioned interracial relationships as anathema to Hitler's politics. In the *New York Amsterdam News*, the headline argued that to fight interracial couples was to agree with Hitler: "English White Woman and Colored Husband Under Heel of Hitler."<sup>42</sup> In contrast to the fascist world, the Western one could accept a Paul Robeson. The "English White Woman" stated that "while I was home in London, I saw one of your famous Colored actors play *Othello* opposite one of our greatest English white actresses and their performances were witnessed nightly....I could tell you of so many mixed marriages I knew of on both sides....since Pearl Harbor-I have heard so many Colored men say that they want to fight and have a crack at the Axis."<sup>43</sup> In addition to normalizing interracial relationships, the story politicized race relations by creating a different "other." Robeson's *Othello* was about *us*, and about America; race hatred was about *them*, and about Hitler.

In black New York, Paul Robeson's London *Othello* was thus not a moment of distanced performance, but an extended discussion of racial inequity. By privileging the performance event itself, scholars miss the larger resonances that the story of Robeson itself had within

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<sup>41</sup> "'Be Yourself,' Advice of Robeson to Negroes," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 7, 1931.

<sup>42</sup> Eva Winn, *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, March 21, 1942.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Harlem. Like Ira Aldridge, Paul Robeson did not need to be seen in performance to perform black success and fight for civil rights. Further, one reason the discussion of black Shakespeare continued was that Robeson was not the only black Othello in Harlem. Several African Americans performed Othello in community and educational performances. The Schomburg Library has a playbill of one such performance that took place at St. James Presbyterian Church in Harlem. It was a celebration of the play in the context of history. In the center of the playbill was a noble and heroic picture of Ira Aldridge, whose history was also repeated inside the playbill. This is one grassroots example of how a New York community gathered to affirm a different narrative of stage history and a non-white claim to Othello's story. The history of Aldridge's international accomplishments was highlighted on the third page of the program: "From Picture on Front Page...Ira Frederick Aldridge was an American tragedian...Edmund Kean made him Othello to his Iago at Belfast...the King of Prussia gave him an autographed letter with a first class medal of the arts of sciences...The emperor of Austria conferred the Grand Cross of Leopold."<sup>44</sup> Bringing together black history and contemporary performance, Othello spoke to a tradition of achievement and the possibility of future black success. This performance did not have the public visibility of Paul Robeson's New York performance. A half a million people would come to see Robeson on Broadway, and certainly far fewer saw the production at St. James. Yet it is still significant that three years before Robeson came to Broadway, an all black amateur production was produced at a church in Harlem. Robeson's Broadway Othello was therefore not entirely imposed on the black community as a symbol of civil rights, but was uniquely situated to realize on a large scale the preexisting identification with Othello's story.

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<sup>44</sup> Othello playbill, "St. James Presbyterian Church," 13 December 1940, file 1159, New York Public Library Schomburg Center for African American History.

Though this production is the only New York African American production with an existing playbill at the Schomburg, other productions were produced in New York or reported on in the black press. The WPA Federal Theatre Project gave some the opportunity to work on the play more than once. “‘Othello’ is Again Due,” *The New York Amsterdam News* reported:

The Richard B. Harrison Students will offer for the third time their production of “Othello” this Thursday night at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, 120<sup>th</sup> street and Lenox Avenue, under the supervision of the Community Drama Unit of the WPA Federal Theatre Project. Among those featured in the all-Negro cast of 26 will be Seymour Brewer and Alice McInnes.<sup>45</sup>

The first black winner of the national forensic award was announced in *The New York Amsterdam News* as Othello: “Caleb Peterson Jr...will take the lead role in Shakespeare’s “Othello” which will be presented at West Virginia State College, May 19.”<sup>46</sup> An indication of the importance of history in the New Negro movement, the “Ira Aldridge Players” formed in 1934 in New York. They promptly produced *Othello*: “The Ira Aldridge Repertoire Players made their debut in Harlem Saturday night when they played to an audience of the W. 137<sup>th</sup> St. Y.W.C.A. The play was “Othello”...the title role was done by Nathaniel Guy, who comes from Washington, and who is the father of the talented singer and actor, Barrington Guy. He achieved a triumph in the part.”<sup>47</sup> These performances gave an opportunity for a diverse segment of black New Yorkers to attach to personalize Othello’s story. There is little indication of the audience attending these productions, or of their actual success; however, these examples reveal that the play was part of life in black New York well before Robeson.

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<sup>45</sup> “Othello is Again Due,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, April 9, 1938.

<sup>46</sup> “Caleb Peterson Takes Lead in “Othello” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 27, 1939.

<sup>47</sup> “Ira Aldridge Players Stage ‘Othello,’ Hit,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, May 12, 1934.

James Hatch has argued that it was really in the churches, schools and communities that positive images of blackness were presented in the early twentieth century. It was in black periodicals like *The Crisis* that an anti-lynching play like Angelina Weld Grimke's *Rachel* could be given a voice. *Othello* was taking place in black churches, communities, and institutions of higher learning. It was uniquely positioned to bridge a gap between the black community and the mainstream white theatre. Robeson created a place for the discussion to happen, but the play's meanings and history were authored by many in black New York. By celebrating black history, claiming Shakespearean correctness, and performing an image of nobility, Harlem used *Othello* to create a new image of itself.

#### The Broadway *Othello* and White Response

Most whites liked Paul Robeson in the 1940s. Some loved him because he had an amazing voice and gave a great concert. Others genuinely celebrated his fight for black legitimacy and civil rights. Yet the popularity had limits, as one Boston woman innocently revealed in her frustration over his London *Othello*. "I bow to the fact that Paul Robeson is a great artist," she told the *London Sunday Express*, but "I cannot stomach the idea of a coloured man playing opposite to a woman of my own race."<sup>48</sup> Her story was reprinted and reframed in the black press of New York. White racism was again the punch line. "I come from Boston. We are not against Negroes," she said, "but we do not like them near us."<sup>49</sup> Robeson the "artist" was accepted while Robeson the man was marginalized. Though many whites did not express the same disgust at Robeson's *Othello* as this Boston woman, her story indicates an important principle: the consumption of Robeson's art should not be equated with the acceptance of his humanity.

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<sup>48</sup> "American Hatred Against Robeson," *The New York Amsterdam News*, May 21, 1930.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Of course Robeson was not the only black artist in New York at this time. Black theatre was an established presence well before Robeson's Broadway performance. Playwrights such as Willis Richardson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Hughes Allison circulated during the 1920s and 1930s, often depicting heroic black characters in their work. The Federal Theatre Project's Negro Unit provided opportunities for exploration of black themes and authorship in such work as Du Bois's *Haiti*. Further, the Federal Theatre Project had a well-publicized production of Orson Welles's *Macbeth*; the so-called "voodoo Macbeth" was a successful Shakespearean piece cast with black actors. Perhaps these efforts in combination made the white public more able to accept Robeson's Othello. However, as many have also argued, these productions and playwrights did not fundamentally change black representation in the white mainstream. In 1937, Sterling Brown noted that "Broadway, for all its growing liberal attitudes, is still entranced with the exotic primitive, the comic stooge and the tragic mulatto. The anecdote of the manger who, having read a serious social drama about Negro life, insisted upon the insertion of "hot spots," of a song and dance, is still too pertinent."<sup>50</sup> When Robeson took the stage, minstrelsy was still the norm of mainstream black representation. Robeson himself was a film star before he was Othello on Broadway. In one of his most successful and acclaimed performances as *Emperor Jones*, film censor Will Hayes made him reshoot all of the scenes with African American actress Fredi Washington. After seeing the film, Hayes argued that Washington appeared so light-skinned that she could be interpreted to be a white woman. This, of course, would make their amorous scenes an example of interracial mixing. Washington had to reshoot the scenes after "blacking up" to make her skin darker.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Doris E. Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-1959* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 47.

<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of this see Jennie Saxena, "Preserving African-American Cinema: The Case of The Emperor Jones," *The Moving Image* 3, Issue 1 (2003).

The fear displayed by Hayes coexisted with an increased sale of romanticized blackness as sound came to film.<sup>52</sup> To white producers the white voice rang false in the new “talkies,” but the black voice, or more accurately, their interpretation of it, seemed authentic. There was a new market for films such as *Hallelujah* that celebrated this natural black voice, depicting blacks as perfectly contented with slavery and cotton-picking. In these films, black actors would occasionally break out into happy song or reveal their violent nature. Famous black actor Clarence Muse remarked that he actually had to learn to speak in a Negro dialect to act in these Hollywood films.<sup>53</sup> These images reinforced a popular Broadway depiction of blackness that limited blacks to certain stereotyped roles.<sup>54</sup> Robeson’s *Othello* represented a significant departure from these images of degraded black characters; yet it simultaneously benefitted from an established consumer culture of whites purchasing images of blackness.

The increased attention to female audience members and proper womanhood, outlined in chapter four, continued to shape reactions to the black *Othello*. When it was rumored that Paul Robeson was to play *Othello* in America, several newspapers wondered where they would find a white woman in America willing to act with him. Race and gender continued to be at the center of this discussion. One headline read “White Actress Doesn’t Mind Kissing Robeson;” another declared “Lillian Gish would accept Robeson’s ‘Love-Making’ in ‘Othello’.”<sup>55</sup> A theatre-going consumer culture sensitive to women’s responses made the Robeson performance threatening and potentially subversive.

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<sup>52</sup> For an excellent article on this topic, see Alice Maurice, “Cinema at Its Source”: Synchronizing Race and Sound in the Early Talkies, *Camera Obscura*, 49, Volume 17, Number 1 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>53</sup> Donald Crafton. *The Talkies* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1997). 417.

<sup>54</sup> As previously mentioned, there are several exceptions to this, including the work of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes.

<sup>55</sup> *The Pittsburg Courier*, June 13, 1930; September 6, 1930.



In this context, white New Yorkers had a family of responses to Robeson's *Othello* that revealed competing and contradictory impulses influenced by various forms of cultural production.<sup>56</sup> Some, like the Boston woman, began opposed to the black *Othello* in 1930 and continued to voice their criticisms through the 1943 performance. Others supported it as a just advancement of black civil rights. It is apparent that for many, it did not fundamentally change perceptions of race. In stating this, I do not mean to suggest that it was not a significant achievement in civil rights; as the preceding and following sections will hopefully reveal, it was very significant in the black community, and caused fundamental changes in white America in the way the character was discussed for generations. Yet by examining the playbills of the Robeson performance and white responses to the play, I argue that it is also true that Robeson represented an image of blackness that whites wanted to purchase. And whiteness persisted. The black *Othello* was a civil rights achievement and he was another product sold to mark a progressive white identity.

### Consuming Robeson's *Othello*

While New York certainly changed from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, the sale of the theatrical event of *Othello* remained somewhat consistent. Walter Hampden's 1925 *Othello* at the Sam Shubert Theatre where Robeson would perform in 1943 had many of the same characteristics as the late nineteenth century embodiments of Booth and Salvini.<sup>57</sup> Hampden was a whitened Moor sold as a consumer product to men and women who evaluated both his fidelity to Shakespeare and his academic preparation. The playbill sold the cast next to

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<sup>56</sup> In this section I do not review whether the performance was a good one or how each person responded to the artistic event, but look at how the language being used recreated or reinvented the white power structure. For detailed reviews of the white press, see Duberman 263-279, Vaughan 188-192, Janet Carroll, dissertation, *A Promptbook Study of Margaret Webster's Production of Othello*, Louisiana State University (Ann Arbor: Proquest Information and Learning Company, 1977), 94-121, and particularly Swindall 100-152.

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of this performance, see Lois Potter, *Shakespeare in Performance: Othello* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 90-91. Hampden provides a particularly interesting lens through which to view *Othello* because the next time The Shubert theatre produced *Othello*, Paul Robeson would play the role of the Moor.

ads for shoes, cigars, and valentines. Other pages advised women how not to look like a plain “wallflower” and distinguish themselves with beauty. Hampden was seen to be hearkening back to a tradition of correct white performance; he was, like Booth, a brooding and noble Othello who did not provoke intense emotion, but instead was lauded for his traditional and proper embodiment. According to the *New York Post*, the performance was notable for “recalling the best days of the theatre.”<sup>58</sup> Robert Boutelle wrote in *The New York Times* that “Walter Hampden is giving the most Shakespearean performance of Othello that the American stage has seen.”<sup>59</sup> Hampden was situated in a tradition of Othellos: “he may not be a Booth or an Irving yet, but he is as faithful to the art of the great dramatist as ever one could be.”<sup>60</sup> The acting was celebrated not because it was moving or entertaining, but because it was correct, or in the carefully chosen words of the author, “faithful.”

Eighteen years later on the same stage, the Robeson performance was advertised in the same context of elite consumerism as the whitened Othello of Walter Hampden. Like the playbills of the preceding ninety years, the Robeson Shubert playbill sold the cast and Shakespeare alongside consumer goods. Next to Robeson’s name was an ad for stockings that advised women to “follow the girls.” “Othello” told us that we had to shop at Roger’s Peet Company for Men’s Clothing. Phillip Morris sold cigarettes above Robeson’s name and Ron Merito sold rum below it.

The products sold at Robeson’s performance also marked an identity defined by elitist tastes and a regulated femininity. On the second page of one Robeson *Othello* playbill, a woman

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Potter, 90. Potter also mentions that Novelli “wore unusually dark makeup for the role,” thus making his performance more bestial and less popular.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Boutelle, “Of ‘Othello’ and ‘Candida,’” *The New York Times*, March 1, 1925.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

smiled in a bra advertising “Maiden Form Brassieres.”<sup>61</sup> A skin cream told playgoers that “today you are two persons. The efficient woman with her endless round of duties; the charming creature, feminine and lovely...you will fill both roles more graciously if your skin looks alive.”<sup>62</sup> Opposite this ad was the “synopsis of scenes” and Margaret Webster’s casting as Emilia. “Three Feathers” was “first among fine whiskies,” and Bergdorf Goodman” coats had “all the marks of excellence.” Near the breakdown for Act II’s Cyprus scenes was an ad for Delecta after-dinner liqueur, which stated “Distinguished entertaining calls for a Distinguished Liqueur.”<sup>63</sup> Robeson’s image was featured on most of the weekly playbills, except when they used the space to advertise for war bonds. Even in the times of scarcity, going to the theatre to see Shakespeare was an event for elite men and women who purchased the finest things. The juxtaposition of the Hampden and Robeson playbills reveal this play-going continuity. In 1943 women were advised to “follow the girls;” in 1925, they were advised to avoid being a “wallflower.”

However, unlike Hampden’s *Othello*, Margaret Webster’s *Othello* sold Paul Robeson’s blackness as one of the products. Webster wrote an essay on “The Black Othello” that appeared in the souvenir program. The article provided historical justification for her theatrical choice of casting an African American in the role. Webster wrote that “the difference in race between Othello and every other character in the play is, indeed, the heart of the matter.”<sup>64</sup> This interpretation gave added significance to the event playgoers witnessed as Webster created Shakespeare as a genius and champion of human rights:

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<sup>61</sup> Othello playbill, “Shubert Theatre: Othello,” file 6726, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections, pp 2.

<sup>62</sup> Othello playbill, “Shubert Theatre: Othello,” file 6726, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections, pp 12.

<sup>63</sup> Othello Souvenir Program, “Shubert Theatre: Othello,” file 9393, New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections, pp 14.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Othello stands as a document of the human race, not of individuals imagined by Shakespeare, named in the play and bounded by it; not of a special epoch or race or country, but reaching down into the hearts of men then and now and on into the unforeseen planes of time to come. To us, in 1943, Cyprus and Venice and North Africa are no strange lands; they have drawn very close; space and distance shrink to nothing. So, in the presence of Shakespeare's great humanity, difference of time and manners, race and creed, vanish. We are in the presence of men and women, of ourselves.<sup>65</sup>

Shakespeare's genius was boundless, his meanings self-evident, Othello's blackness, just. By being there, progressive whites saw racism truly explored. Shakespeare made race "vanish" as he spoke to the past, present, and future.

Yet Webster's own racial creed was anything but vanishing. In her public declarations of Othello's blackness and celebration of Paul Robeson, Margaret Webster portrayed herself as a progressive on the cutting edge of the fight for civil rights. She told the *New York Times* that "a Negro actor is acceptable, both academically and practically" in the role of Othello.<sup>66</sup> She did what others did not have the courage to do, arguing that "everyone was scared" to put on this landmark production.<sup>67</sup> In private communication and in published writing, however, she used language that illustrated an understanding of race that was biologically-based and entrenched in the tropes of romantic racialism. In her book *Shakespeare without Tears* Webster discussed her understanding that *Othello* was a "document of the human race...not limited to any age or country."<sup>68</sup> This universality was supported by Robeson's presence as a legitimizing force of authenticity:

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Duberman, 265.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Duberman, 263.

<sup>68</sup> Margaret Webster, *Shakespeare Without Tears* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1955), 237.

When Paul Robeson stepped onto the stage for the very first time, when he spoke his very first line, he immediately, by his very presence, brought an incalculable sense of reality to the entire play. Here was a great man, a man of simplicity and strength; here also was a black man. We believed that he could command the armies of Venice; we knew that he would always be alien to his society.<sup>69</sup>

What made Robeson a “natural” Othello was both his greatness and his simplicity. In other places her language was more troubling. She called Robeson “a natural talent” and “soulful primitive” who represented the “pure” and “instinctive” art of the “Negro.”<sup>70</sup> She famously fought to “get a show out of that big black jellyfish” by using the pain of the racism he personally endured to fuel his stage Othello’s rage.<sup>71</sup> Racism was a director’s tool for her to serve the larger end of a successful performance.

Yet, while Webster’s relationship to the performance may have been disturbing, it was not unique. Webster’s racism was not an anomaly, but was representative of a continued discourse of whiteness in the American theatre. Several others chimed in with agreement that Robeson was a natural actor because of his race and that his Othello was good because he looked the part and lent authenticity to the Moor’s simplicity and vengeance. While the context had shifted in one respect- the black Othello could be noble and in love with a white woman- it continued to rely on an understanding of inherent racial categories. The character traits of Othello happened to suit the inherent qualities of blackness, but that did not mean that other dignified characters were also suitable for blacks.

Despite the insistence of certain journalists that there was nothing “titillating” about Robeson’s blackness and the interracial embodiment, other evidence suggests that this spectacle

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<sup>69</sup> Webster, 236.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Duberman, 270.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Duberman, 269. For a discussion of this relationship, see Carroll 109-112.

was a major attraction of the show.<sup>72</sup> *The Nation* anticipated the performance of a New York Othello, arguing “If Paul Robeson plays Othello in New York, as it is announced he has contracted to do; if Lillian Gish, who has been suggested for the part, plays Desdemona...it will be a great dramatic spectacle.”<sup>73</sup> He then added as afterthought “and it will be, in addition, a milestone in the struggle of the race.” For liberal whites, the production could be celebrated as racial progress, while also being a spectacle of racial embodiment. In a rare critical view of the performance by a black journalist, Miles Jefferson noted his perceived titillation among the white crowd. He wrote of the white audience in the African American social science journal *Phylon*:

Another reason for the triumphant success of this production of Othello was...the novelty of seeing a real, bona-fide Negro strangle a white woman of high and noble status was enough in itself to attract a certain segment of the morbidly curious population (more of whom exist among the so-called intellectuals and carriage trade than you might think!) as well as a generous representation from the masses...his disrobing to the waist in one of the final scenes of passion, which provoked “oh’s” and “ah’s” in the audience not because it added anything to the forceful projection of Othello’s anguish, but because the display of the Robeson torso was a splendid sight to see.<sup>74</sup>

Jefferson’s experience of the show was that some whites were consuming the event not because of its social statement, but because it fulfilled a morbid curiosity. The white audience wanted to see a real black man embody the stereotype of black violence toward a white woman. Robeson’s black torso was an image to be consumed by a responsive white audience. This was a reframed

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<sup>72</sup> For instance, John Chapman of *The New York Daily News* stated of the performance that “there is...nothing cheap or titillating about it,” quoted in Carroll, 106.

<sup>73</sup> “The Drifter,” *The Nation*, May 21, 1930.

<sup>74</sup> Miles M. Jefferson, “The Negro on Broadway-1944,” *Phylon*, 6, Issue 1 (1<sup>st</sup> Qtr., 1945): 46.

“whiteness” that was consistent with a self-declared politically progressive white audience who continued to believe that racial identities were biologically-based and immutable.

Indeed, the white press used the discourse of Shakespearean correctness to authorize both negative and positive white responses to Robeson. Many whites joined the chorus of black Americans by justifying the black Othello as Shakespeare’s true Moor. In a 1943 publication of *Life* magazine, for instance, the black Othello is contextualized by history:

Since 1604, when *Othello* had its premier, the role of the Moor has been played by some of the world’s most accomplished actors. But despite Shakespeare’s intention that the part be played by a Negro, it remained for the present production to satisfy that condition on Broadway by casting Paul Robeson as the Moor.<sup>75</sup>

According to *Life*, it was Shakespeare’s intention to have a Negro Othello. By applauding the production, journalists participated in a self-congratulation which saw their era of Broadway realize the true Shakespearean vision. The *Life* spread on the Robeson celebrated the black Othello, but also contained two disturbing images that contextualized the positive response. One was a picture of Robeson strangling Uta Hagen, his eyes intense with rage. This, of course, was the murderous Othello of Act V, scene II who had been used for years to confirm the stereotype that blacks were inherently violent. It fulfilled rather than contradicted the long standing image of the black man as a violent perpetrator of white women. Opposite the image was an advertisement for “Wembley Ties;” the consumer culture was never far away from the images of Othello. The second image was a nearby ad for “Aunt Jemima Pancakes” which advertised the pancakes with a grinning image of “Aunt Jemima” and the phrase “Lawdy how my temptilatin’

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<sup>75</sup> “Othello.” *Life Magazine*. (November 22, 1943): 87.

Aunt Jemima Pancakes will happify yo' folks!"<sup>76</sup> The black Othello was sold by the white press in a context of black violence and continuation of the tropes of minstrelsy. Many whites argued that Shakespeare intended for the black Othello to be presented on stage. Yet the white press did not consequently deconstruct other aspects of white-authored blackness that maintained other values of white supremacy.

In her review of Robeson in *Theatre Arts Monthly* Rosamond Gilder justified the black Othello with Shakespearean textual evidence. She began:

This brings up once again the argument as to whether Shakespeare had in mind a black man or a brown when he wrote the play in 1604. The fact is that though he calls his hero a Moor, he describes a Negro referring repeatedly to his 'sooty bosom' and 'black face' ....there is therefore, every reason why a Negro should act the part, and since it is the only great Shakespearean role so markedly appropriate, Paul Robeson's appearance in it is long overdue.<sup>77</sup>

Her argument was that any close reading of Shakespeare's intentions justified Robeson's casting. Implicit in the argument was that Shakespeare does not justify other casting of black actors. Othello was "the only great Shakespearean role" that provided this option. She later stated that Robeson "is a massive creature, physically powerful with the gentleness that often accompanies great strength. He expresses well the simplicity, even the guilelessness, that Shakespeare so clearly defines."<sup>78</sup> By describing Robeson's physicality and "simplicity," Gilder reaffirmed an image of romanticized blackness. And it was not her, but Shakespeare who so clearly defined what the character meant. Gilder later faulted Robeson because "his Othello arouses admiration

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 89, 90. For an excellent discussion of the larger social significance of the "Aunt Jemima" phenomenon, see M.M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1998).

<sup>77</sup> Rosamond Gilder "Othello and Venus: Broadway in Review" *Theatre Arts Monthly* (December 1943): 700.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.



and pity but not quite the Aristotelian ‘terror’ that Shakespeare constantly demands of his interpreters.”<sup>79</sup> Gilder’s idea of what Shakespeare demanded legitimized her critique of the play. Instead of simply saying that she did not feel ‘terror,’ she argued that Shakespeare demanded that she feel it.

Many others in the white press used racialized language to argue that Shakespeare was finally being realized through Robeson. In *Variety*, “Khan” described him as a “giant black man” who “embraces clinging, virginal-and white-Desdemona!”<sup>80</sup> What Khan saw was a momentous realization of Shakespeare’s intentions: “for the first time in the history of Broadway theatre, as the Bard had written it-a black man actually played the Venetian warrior.”<sup>81</sup> Like “Khan,” Otis Guernsey in *The New York Herald Tribune* agreed that Shakespeare authorized the work of Robeson’s Othello, providing contrast to the “phoney blackface” of old.<sup>82</sup> Many others focused on Paul Robeson as a physical presence and argued, like Webster, that he lent reality to the play. *The Wall Street Journal* discussed the “authenticity” of the production and the fact that “Paul Robeson is magnificently endowed by nature for the title role.”<sup>83</sup> Few of these reviews in the white press made the connection made in the black press that the performance was a watershed for racial progress. These positive reviews shared the idea that Shakespeare authorized this specific authentic black embodiment, but not black civil rights in general.

Romantic racialized language appeared in many positive responses to Robeson’s Othello. *The New Yorker* wrote that Robeson’s “reading is admirably clear...and he is ideal pictorially...a perfect mixture of the noble, the primitive, and the obscurely terrifying.”<sup>84</sup> Black nobility was

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<sup>79</sup> Gilder 702.

<sup>80</sup> As quoted in Carroll 107. From “Khan,” “Othello” *Variety*, (October 27, 1943): 44.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Carroll 107. From Otis L. Guernsey Jr., “The Playbill: Paul Robeson Is an Othello Ready-Made,” *The New York Herald Tribune*, October 17, 1943.

<sup>83</sup> “The Theatre,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 1943.

<sup>84</sup> *The New Yorker*, October 30, 1943, 39.

accommodated with black simplicity. Romantic racialism often intersected with language of Shakespearean correctness. The editor of *Life* magazine defended its spread on Paul Robeson's Othello by insisting that Shakespeare saw "Moors" as "Negroes," using as evidence Aaron the Moor's line from *Titus Andronicus* about his "fleece of woolly hair."<sup>85</sup> This editorial defense was in response to a letter that insisted that "your statement that Shakespeare intended the part of Othello to be played by a Negro is wholly unwarranted and flatly contradicted by the facts."<sup>86</sup> Thus, even when overt racism was challenged, it was done so with a reaffirmation of inherent racial difference and stereotype.

Like the letter to *Life* magazine, others criticized the performance and Robeson's blackness by claiming Shakespeare's intentions. Webster and Robeson, they argued, violated the true Shakespearean. Margaret Marshall stated in *The Nation* that Robeson "is not the Moor as Shakespeare conceived him. Both Mr. Robeson and Miss Webster have tried to prove that Othello is a Negro; they have attempted also to prove that "Othello" is a play about race. Both theories seem to me false and foolish."<sup>87</sup> Marshall saw the play's failure as a failure to live up to the truth of Shakespeare. S. Young of *The New Republic* wrote that the production improperly cut language and scenes, arguing "you can do what you deem expedient with this or that play of Shakespeare's, but not with "*Othello*." Its perfections, idea, technique, and impact are inextricably bound together."<sup>88</sup> Kappo Phelan of *The Commonwealth* critiqued the production by saying that what "matters (and what certainly mattered to Shakespeare) is that this Moor is a great and successful warrior, although nowhere in the eight scenes on view in Forty-Fourth

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<sup>85</sup> Letter, *Life* (December 13, 1943): 8.

<sup>86</sup> Letter, *Life* (December 13, 1943): 6.

<sup>87</sup> Margaret Marshall, "Drama," *The Nation*, (October 30 1943): 508.

<sup>88</sup> S. Young, "Othello, Shubert Theatre" *The New Republic* (November 1, 1943): 621-622.

Street are we made especially aware of that fact.”<sup>89</sup> London critic Herbert Farjeon offered very strong words at Paul Robeson: “the fact that he was a Negro did not assist him...Shakespeare wrote this part for a white man to play and Mr. Robeson is not far wrong when he says that ‘Shakespeare is always right.’”<sup>90</sup> Each of these reviews took issue with Robeson’s performance on the grounds that it is not true to what Shakespeare wanted. Though people disagreed on what the production meant, they shared language that authorized their interpretations. Each critic assumed knowledge of Shakespeare’s intentions that allowed for an ideological masking: the black Othello was not something that *they* disagreed with, but something that a deified *William Shakespeare* disagreed with. Shakespeare continued to serve an ideology of whiteness that reinforced their power and privilege.

Strands of reaction to the black Othello thus remained in service to the white-constructed Shakespeare: whites maintained a language of romantic racialism within a larger culture of minstrelized images of blackness; the performance was consumed in a context that did not fundamentally challenge the value systems of white theatre-goers; and white critics justified arguments with their own constructs of correctness which affirmed black inferiority. It can be argued that it is *because* the Robeson performance happened in the context of white consumption that it was such a significant statement of civil rights. Somehow a noble black man was able to kiss a white woman on stage in front of a largely white audience who continued to care about trivial material goods. Or this context reveals that not much had changed in the white community, and that Robeson’s seemingly radical embodiment could be absorbed into a theatre culture that largely held the same values. While I think there is legitimate truth in both of these,

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<sup>89</sup> K. Phelan, *The Commonweal* (November 5, 1943): 72.

<sup>90</sup> As quoted by Marvin Rosenberg in *The Masks of Othello* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 152. Rosenberg also quotes Abraham Sofaer who argues that “Othello is not a colored man in the American sense of the word, but a noble Arab: “there is nothing low or gross about Othello. His performance should elicit a superb “maleness” with great beauty and charm of thought and utterance.”

the lack of change seen on Broadway in subsequent years with regard to presentations of dignified blackness should temper the wholesale acceptance of the radical shift that occurred with Robeson.

And yet this is not the whole story of white reaction to the performance. Not all whites expressed titillation, condemnation, or romantic racialism. Samuel Sillen of the leftist *Daily Worker* wrote that “the further we get away from Shakespeare the more intense becomes the problem of Negro national oppression...the more emphatic becomes the insistence that the Moor was descended from the Caucasian race.” He concluded with Shakespeare’s blessing of Robeson who had “created a new Othello but...has brilliantly restored the Othello that Shakespeare conceived.”<sup>91</sup> Like African Americans in Harlem, Sillen argued that Shakespeare created Othello at a time of idyllic racial equity. It was his white interpreters that had distorted both racial meanings and Shakespearean intents. The language and politics employed by Webster and sympathetic critics were not simply received in a completely racist environment, but were choices made among many possibilities.

#### The Robeson Performance: African American Response

In this section, I want to explore how black New Yorkers responded to the production. Scholars have traditionally given superficial treatment to the black press and its interpretations of Robeson’s performance. In his chapter on the 1943 *Othello* in his biography of Paul Robeson, for instance, Martin Duberman spends a paragraph on reviews in the black press. He quotes only Fredi Washington from *The People’s Voice* who wrote that a filmed version of *Othello* would have had a greater impact. He states that “most of the black press hailed the production as a milestone in race relations, but almost none of the white press did.”<sup>92</sup> This very general statement

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<sup>91</sup> Samuel Sillen, “The Discussion of Othello,” *The Daily Worker*, November 9, 1943.

<sup>92</sup> Duberman, 279.

is largely accurate despite the lack of support. By examining the reviews and responses of black New York, I try not to restate the findings of other scholars *that* the performance was seen as a milestone in race relations, but *why* it was. I argue that the production was important for blacks because it continued a history of black achievement, legitimated their ownership of Shakespearean meanings, revealed the inadequacies of white history, and actuated a black performance of heroism.

For many black New Yorkers, Robeson's performance was both a moment of great significance and one moment within a history of black achievement. In reporting on Robeson's performance in its trial run in New Jersey before it came to Broadway, Marian Freeman of *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* detailed its importance through the lens of black history:

For the first time in American history, a Negro-Paul Robeson-played "Othello" with a white company in support...it is significant that every major newspaper in New York sent critics to the opening-an unusual procedure for Summer stock....one critic wrote 'Robeson's performance is of such stature that no white man should ever dare presume to play it again especially since it is to be strongly questioned that any member of the audience, no matter how delicate of sensitivities was offended by a single moment of action...in searching the records, one finds that America is a century behind in its Shakespearean casting. As early as 1840, Ira Aldridge played the role of Othello in Dublin....from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century's African Free Company, headed by James Hewlitt, to the Lafayette Players, Negro groups experimented with Shakespearean dramas.<sup>93</sup>

The Robeson embodiment was celebrated for its groundbreaking "stature" and influence on its white audience, but it was also lauded within a tradition of black Shakespeareans. It was a story

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<sup>93</sup> Marian Freeman, "Paul Robeson Makes History in Home Town By Playing Role of 'Othello' With White Cast" *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, August 22, 1942.

of one black hero and a story of a community. The history of black performance that Freeman described was an indictment of white racism and American Shakespeareans. American artists were “a century behind” other countries in their understanding of the bard’s work. Black history and the Robeson performance together argued that white Shakespeare was unjust and incorrect.

The larger connection of Robeson’s performance to a new narrative of black history was seen in other reviews in the black press. Frank Griffith’s description of the play in *The New York Age* was not a critique of the production, but a reflection on its social significance and place in history. At the performance, he felt the spirit of Ira Aldridge cheering on Paul Robeson:

As I sat in my seat in the Shubert Theatre Tuesday evening and the lights began to lower, my mind went back many years to a story I read as a kid and have since reread many times, the story of a great Negro Shakespearean actor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His name was Ira Aldridge. Then the music began to play and the performance that Ira Aldridge had wanted to give in 1839 in America had come to life on the Shubert stage over a hundred years later...As I sat on the subway home, I felt that the spirit of Aldridge must have been back stage and had said: “Well done, Paul Robeson. I could not have done it better.

Democracy moves slowly, but you have helped it move another step forward.”<sup>94</sup>

For Griffith, Aldridge and Robeson were in conversation; black history informed contemporary black progress. They fought the same cause through the same role, and the situation was improving. Unrealized a century before, the dreams of Ira Aldridge came alive through the performance of Paul Robeson.

Dan Burley of *The New York Amsterdam News* discussed the performance for its potential to realize the values of America. His headline was not about artistic success or

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<sup>94</sup> Frank Griffith, “Writer Compares Ira Aldridge’s “Othello” to Paul Robeson’s Modern Interpretation,” *The New York Age*, November 5, 1943.

Shakespeare but the essence of America itself: “Democracy on B’ dway in Robeson Play.” The stakes of the play therefore could not be higher:

Can a Negro in 1943 do what was impossible the year before and embrace a white woman on the public stage? And can this same Negro escape the written and verbal criticism from both the press and the public after having done so? These are some of the questions being freely talked about and debated on Broadway theatre circles, as well as in citadels of culture in New York City as the date of Paul Robeson’s debut as “Othello, The Moor of Venice” at the Shubert Theatre approaches...Hagen...will be the first white woman to play a love scene in which she is embraced by a Negro on a New York theatre legitimate stage.<sup>95</sup>

Burley described the coming performance as a battle for racial definitions and black equality. Whites had previously resisted “whenever a Negro was to be portrayed as something else than a lackey or thug,” and yet Burley argued, “right now, Broadway is holding its breath, figuratively, in anticipation of Robeson in ‘Othello.’”<sup>96</sup> African Americans had been on Broadway for years, but never like this. It was because the play stood in sharp contrast to the minstrel tradition that depicted blacks as lackeys that the presentation of a black hero was particularly significant. He was optimistic that it would be an event that would fundamentally change the American theatre: “If Robeson, who has never been a hit on the Broadway stage, comes through, and expected rush of plays, dramas, and other material in which the “new understanding” is stressed or otherwise emphasized, may be expected.”<sup>97</sup> The performance had the potential to set a standard that issued in a new era of dignified roles for blacks on Broadway.

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<sup>95</sup> Dan Burley, “Democracy on B’ dway in Robeson Play,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 16, 1943.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

The NAACP's *The Crisis* celebrated Robeson's performance by printing a full-page photograph of his Othello on the cover of their December 1943 issue. They described the photograph on the inside cover as "Paul Robeson as the Moor in the Theatre Guild production of Othello, The Moor of Venice, under the direction of Margaret Webster, has received one of the greatest ovations in the history of the New York theatre. Critics have, with a few exceptions, raved over Mr. Robeson's interpretation of the role."<sup>98</sup> The choice to put in on the cover indicated its larger significance to the black community. *The Crisis* was not an entertainment magazine, and therefore, the headlining of Robeson identified it as an event of racial, not artistic progress. *The New York Age* also made use of his image in a celebratory fashion, creating a cartoon about him that advertised: "Paul Robeson: Actor, Artist, Athlete."<sup>99</sup> *Opportunity* chose to print a full page picture of Robeson as Othello on the second page of its winter issue in 1944, and later quoted white critics who lauded Robeson's nobility.<sup>100</sup> These images made Robeson and his dignity a visual presence within a black public.

The black community also read that Robeson used the performance to advance black rights. Others have rightly argued that Paul Robeson used the production as a platform for racial issues, but it is important to establish that Robeson's fight was reported in the African American community. This larger goal was essential Robeson's mission: "I work harder in one performance of *Othello* than I ever did in three concerts...I have only one ambition-to be a great scholar, a teacher, and I'll die with it. I want only to teach Negroes, for I've always felt that education is the only solution to our problem."<sup>101</sup> He performed in various community-related

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<sup>98</sup> *The Crisis*, (December 1943): 358.

<sup>99</sup> *The New York Age*, November 20, 1943.

<sup>100</sup> "Paul Robeson as Othello," *Opportunity* (Winter 1944): 27. The image is in the same issue on page two.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Edwin P. Hoyt, *Paul Robeson: The American Othello* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1967), 121.



performances that advanced local causes, all of which were covered in the black press.<sup>102</sup>

Numerous periodicals advertised that he would not play Othello in Jim Crow Houses. The headline “Paul Robeson and ‘Othello’ Will Ignore Washington and Baltimore,” for instance, was printed in *The New York Amsterdam News* before the Broadway opening.<sup>103</sup> The reports in the black press are important: the performance was not just an indictment of white racism communicated to white America, but a source of solidarity within the black community.

This larger social significance was noted by African American leaders and by the people of Harlem. Walter White, secretary of the NAACP, wrote to Lawrence Langer that the play had a larger political and social consequence for the black population. He wrote not to celebrate the play’s “dramatic excellence,” but because: “The play, with Paul Robeson as Othello and Jose Ferrer as Iago, has tremendously interested Negroes throughout the country. The playing of a Moor by a Negro actor has given them hope that race prejudice is not as insurmountable an obstacle as it sometimes appears to be.”<sup>104</sup> It represented hope within a grassroots movement of black civil rights, not simply a mainstream success in the white legitimate theatre. In Harlem’s *The People’s Voice*, a poll asked if “roles given to the Negro actors in the theatre and on the screen are improving?”<sup>105</sup> Several of the respondents said the answer started with Paul Robeson: “Yes. Doesn’t Paul Robeson in Othello mean anything?” This anecdotal evidence supports the articles in newspapers and the NAACP reports. Together these reactions of black America indicate that the Robeson Othello was claimed by a large segment of the African American

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<sup>102</sup> “Riverdale Presents Benefit Performance of ‘Othello’ at Schubert Theatre Nov. 5” *The New York Age*, October 30, 1943.

<sup>103</sup> “Paul Robeson and ‘Othello’ Will Ignore Washington and Baltimore,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 19, 1943.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Carroll, 204. Letter written November 24, 1943.

<sup>105</sup> Llewellyn Ranson, “Question of the Week,” *People’s Voice*, May 6, 1944.

population. The performance was not just about what white America was doing wrong, but what black America was doing right.

Yet there are examples of black Americans who disliked the performance. It is important to pause in this discussion of the response of “the” African American community to reinforce the idea that, like white America, black America was not a monolithic entity, but a diverse population who often disagreed. C.L.R. James, for instance, wrote in a personal letter that Robeson was “rotten.” He wrote, “you see, I saw the Othello. It has created a tremendous stir here. In my opinion it, particularly Paul (Robeson), was lousy... To hear John Gielgud or Edith Evans is to hear a miracle of rhythmic beauty and naturalness. Without the first, there is no Shakespeare. Robeson was rotten... Shakespeare is dangerous for the amateur.”<sup>106</sup> These words reflected the values of the community of “Shakespearean correctness;” his critique was based on his own personal understanding of how the genius Shakespeare should be performed. Yet James also made a distinction between the aesthetic quality of Robeson’s performance and its social significance. “One thing the play has done, however,” he wrote, “it shows that Othello was a black man-who felt his colour and his age were a handicap to him... the whole American Negro question was highlighted by the play. Politically it is a great event.” James too thought that Shakespeare intended Othello to be black and that the larger event was still important, despite its questionable artistic merit.<sup>107</sup>

Miles M. Jefferson also wrote that the performance was not particularly successful. “Robeson seemed dramatically static and stiff except on occasion when he resorted to sensation

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<sup>106</sup> C.L.R. James, personal letter to Constance Webb, January 5, 1944. From *The C.L.R. James Reader*, edited by Anna Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 140-142.

<sup>107</sup> This letter was not read by a New York public, but may have been indicative of how some felt about the performance.

tricks to cover up an inner insufficiency in interpretation,” Jefferson opined. More important to him however, was the dearth of “Negro themes” on the stage in general:

Certainly Robeson’s choice for the majestic role, and his assumption of it marked a step forward (or let us say it should, in fear of being too optimistic!) in the identification of the modern American Negro actor with a play offering lofty and limitless scope. Our hopes, however, for more plays providing Negro actors of established ability- more than merely Robeson- with opportunities of corresponding quality, if not scope. One is not certain that the “blackfacing” of other classic characters is an expedient to be encouraged. Plays are needed on simple, earthbound, Negro themes (and not all of these, folk plays in dialect!) they need not be plays of Shakespearean grandeur and genius; they can be concerned with some significant aspect of present-day existence.<sup>108</sup>

His celebration of the event as one that advanced the cause was tempered by a lament that Negro themes were not adequately explored in other dramas. This call to find a black voice outside of Shakespeare would continue in the next generation.

### Shakespeare and Authority

For many in black New York, racial progress was authorized by Shakespeare. Dan Burley reviewed the performance with the headline “Paul Robeson as “Othello” Strikes Big Blow at Intolerance.”<sup>109</sup> Burley wrote that Robeson was the true embodiment envisioned by Shakespeare: “He performs as though he were endowed with the knowledge that Shakespeare, somehow, must have divined that he would come along some day and do justice to the delineation of the brooding Moor’s life.”<sup>110</sup> This correct Shakespearean performance authorized

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<sup>108</sup> Miles M. Jefferson, “The Negro on Broadway-1944,” *Phylon*, 6, Issue 1 (1<sup>st</sup> Qtr., 1945), 46.

<sup>109</sup> Dan Burley, “Paul Robeson as “Othello” Strikes Big Blow at Intolerance,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 30, 1943.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

a new view of race. It was “the most concrete step to date taken by the Negro on the American Stage” Burley wrote, adding “the ability of a Negro has finally been judged more important than his color and the consequences are exciting, thrilling to contemplate.”<sup>111</sup> Though he did not invoke the names of previous white interpreters of the role, he asserted that “Robeson sets a standard for all Othellos past and future.” For years Kean had “set the standard” for Forrest who set it for Booth, who set it for Hampden. Now Robeson set the standard for all of them.

Robeson continued to justify his performance by arguing that he was realizing what Shakespeare had intended. Robeson said of playing Othello that “I am approaching the part as Shakespeare wrote it and I am playing Othello as a man whose tragedy lay in the fact that he was sooty black.”<sup>112</sup> In one particularly revealing quote from *Newsweek*, Robeson argued that Shakespeare was one of the most current voices in the cause for black rights. The writer stated that “Robeson feels that he is ‘talking for the Negroes in the way only Shakespeare can. This play is about the problem of minority groups—a blackamoor who tried to find equality among the whites. It’s right up my alley.’” Robeson biographer Ron Ramdin wrote that Robeson “was absorbed in trying to determine exactly what Shakespeare meant,” studying how words were said in Shakespeare’s England and finding historical and textual justifications for the role to be performed by a black man.”<sup>113</sup> Robeson stated elsewhere that “Shakespeare meant Othello to be a black moor from Africa, an African of the highest nobility of heritage...he is intensely proud of his color and culture.”<sup>114</sup> Robeson legitimized his performance and an idea of African nobility by stating that he knew what “Shakespeare meant.” Robeson did not justify his performance by its theatrical quality, but by its Shakespearean authenticity.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Ron Ramdin, *Paul Robeson* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1987), 64.

<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Ramdin, 66.

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Rosenberg, 195.

W.E.B. Du Bois commented on the debate over Othello's race more than once and agreed that Robeson's Othello was the true Shakespearean Othello. In 1942, Du Bois wrote in the journal *Phylon*:

Paul Robeson appeared in the little theatre, Brattle Hall, Cambridge, Massachusetts, during the 1942 season as Othello. This was the first time since the great Ira Aldridge that the character of Othello was played by a Negro, which, despite critics, was undoubtedly the type that Shakespeare had in mind.<sup>115</sup>

Like Robeson, Du Bois argued that the performance was not only just, but more correct than other white-based performances. It was what "Shakespeare had in mind." In "As the Crow Flies," written on December 11, 1943 Du Bois historicized the Othello performance in *The New York Amsterdam News*:

The high spot of this visit to New York was of course, Robeson's Othello. I have seen Othello in many lands and with many actors. I began my theatre-going in the day when Othello was indubitably white: slightly-oh, very slightly- brunette, but unquestionably a white European of the masterful, world-shaking type. Shakespeare's allusions to "thick lips" and "black ram:" to "soot y bosom" and differences of race, fell on deaf ears, mine as well as others. But in Margaret Webster's Othello, how naturally all these allusions fall in place and make the greatness of the play. I doubt if ever again an actor will dare portray Othello as white.<sup>116</sup>

For Du Bois, Shakespeare and Broadway seemed to be changing. Othello used to be white, but now belonged to Paul Robeson and to black America. Du Bois's comments, along with the others in the black press, further indicated a progression toward black ownership of Othello's

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<sup>115</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Phylon* (1942): 433.

<sup>116</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "As the Crow Flies," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 11, 1943.

story. The “whiteness” that had infected production and scholarship encountered significant black response that deconstructed its logic and challenged it on its own tropes of Shakespearean authority.

Indeed these critiques clarify how African Americans made the performance speak to larger social issues. To get at the underlying power of whiteness in Shakespeare, it is important not only to identify *that* black New Yorkers saw the social significance of the event, but *how* they created language to directly challenge white tradition. The black response to Robeson created a narrative of black history that revised and corrected white history and argued for the possibility of black success and genius. Blacks claimed Shakespearean correctness to authorize an ideology of universal freedom. Finally, the Robeson Othello actuated and performed dignity through Broadway performances and images in the black press that contradicted the conclusions of minstrelsy. If some aspect of race is indeed performance, if it is by performing an action that it becomes an aspect of racial definition, then the act of performing Othello actually made possible the dignified black man and helped redefine blackness in the eyes of many audience members.

Nancy Shoemaker writes that “the emphasis on European image-making consigns American Indians and other non-white peoples to a passive role in the construction of knowledge. They exist only as the objects of white observation, and the power to label or name resides with Europeans.”<sup>117</sup> While white literary critics had real power, they did not prevent African Americans from self-defining and claiming Othello as their own. Paul Robeson made himself the new author of Shakespeare in his performance of Othello, claiming him as the rightful owner of the property that was his story.

Jesse Simple

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<sup>117</sup> Nancy Shoemaker, “How Indians Got to Be Red,” *American Historical Review* 102, Issue 3 (June 1997): 625.

The possibility that *Othello* could continue to serve white racism was noted in 1944 by Langston Hughes's character "Jesse Simple" in the national edition of the *Chicago Defender*. Simple was a lone voice who argued that the Robeson performance actually had negative social impact. The narrator of the piece tried to convince Simple of the significance of the Robeson performance. Simple confessed that he was "never so ashamed in my life."<sup>118</sup> The narrator responded that "Paul Robeson is a great man." That fact only confirmed Simple's reaction: "that is why I was so ashamed...to see him acting so dumb." The narrator told him it was a "famous play by Shakespeare," and he responded "I do not care who it is by...I do not like to see my people playing dumb in public." With these few thoughts, Simple called into question everything that Robeson, Aldridge, and the African American public valued about the performance of a black Othello. Shakespeare did indeed have a great cultural reputation. For Simple this was not enough:

'He is playing a fool,' said Simple. 'And I do not like to see Robeson play a fool. I do not like to see any Negro play a fool. It looks like every time Joyce takes me downtown to see a play, it is about a Negro playing a fool. The last time it were NATIVE SON-where a colored man chokes a white woman to death in bed. I ain't been on Broadway since, 'till here comes my birthday and Joyce tells me she's got a nice big surprise for me, to just follow her. And what do I see? Another Negro choke another white woman to death in bed-and a pretty white woman at that! I tell you, Othello were a fool...I think Paul Robeson is a great man, and a race man, also a leader...which is why I do not like to see him acting a fool walking around in a bathrobe slapping his wife all over the stage, then

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<sup>118</sup> Langston Hughes, "Here to Yonder," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, June 3, 1944.

choking her to death in bed...I do not like to see Paul Robeson slap a white woman in front of all them people in that theatre.<sup>119</sup>

Despite the narrator's efforts to convince him that Robeson is only acting and that it was just a play, and that the white critics watching it loved it, Simple objected. Indeed, he argued, it was dangerous to present those violent images and call it "Art." "Every time white folks see Art and it is about a colored man choking a white woman to death-it seems real. That is not good for the Race, and I do not like such Art. I feel ashamed."<sup>120</sup> The narrator later chided Simple's critique by saying that he was not perfect, that he gets drunk from time to time. Simple responded that he was "just a man." When the narrator said "so is Othello," Simple replied "No, he ain't...He is Paul Robeson." According to this argument, Paul Robeson was not just a man. What he did and what he said had consequences in the black community. Through Simple, Hughes highlighted the negative consequences of embodying blackness when it involved violence done to a white person. It was dangerous to present the image of violence against a white woman to an audience of white people and critics. Further, it was because they identified the performance with reality that the image was so damaging to the perceptions of black people.

And based on much of the white response, Simple was right. Whites did not transcend racialized thinking, but found new ways to justify it. It was because he was a simple black man, many continued to argue, that Othello was duped by Iago. It may have argued against one kind of race-thinking- that blacks and whites should never intermarry-but it confirmed the other: black people are violent and primitive. Simple revealed at this moment how whiteness could continue despite Robeson's success. It lent a reality and an authenticity to the performance because it confirmed a stereotype. The image of black violence did damage. And this was well-publicized

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.



damage. It was not just any “man,” but Paul Robeson, famous “race man” who advocated these ideas. Hughes brilliantly predicted the questions raised by practitioners and scholars about the play today: How do you justify the presentation of the image of a black man strangling a white woman given the stereotype of black violence? Why is it the pinnacle of the best black actor’s career to play a murderer?<sup>121</sup>

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have revised the traditional narrative of Paul Robeson’s Broadway *Othello* in several ways. First of all, by uncovering the writings and voices of black New York from the 1920s through the 1940s, I have argued that Robeson’s performance was democratically celebrated among African Americans in New York who used it to combat racism and the white status quo. Many black New Yorkers understood not only Paul Robeson, but the possible meanings of a dignified black *Othello*, to give language to their experiences and hope to their lives. Secondly, by tracing the audience consumption of the play in New York, I have argued that Robeson’s performance reveals some continuity with the legitimate Shakespeare among white audiences. Robeson was accommodated into Shakespearean whiteness by an audience that romanticized his blackness. In detailing these responses, I have argued not simply *that* racism continued on Broadway-as many scholars have- but *how* white racism was embedded in the language of correctness and the consumer culture of theatre-going. Whiteness was reinvented to include a certain kind of blackness that did not threaten white consumer society or a belief in inherent racial hierarchies. The Robeson Broadway *Othello* did not stop whites from performing the role, as optimistic journalists assumed, nor did it cause the watershed on Broadway that Dan

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<sup>121</sup> Vaughan is on the forefront of this discussion as are several scholars whose work is in *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, edited by Mythili Kaul (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1996).

Burley and Du Bois hoped it would. Thus, along with the civil rights successes came a reality that whiteness was still property when it came to the ownership of Shakespearean performance.

But the restoration of the black voices surrounding Robeson's Othello is still necessary; Robeson came from somewhere and his performance was meaningful to many people in the black community for a variety of reasons. Further, African American methods of confronting the assumptions of the universal white Shakespeare can continue to serve as guides in our approach to contemporary Shakespeare. Unfortunately, assumptions of Shakespearean correctness are still linked to a white-authored Shakespeare.

In doing this research, I have written a cultural history not based in heroic narratives of good black heroes against evil white racists, but a history about a community who fought certain precepts of racism and of whiteness with specific language. Paul Robeson himself rejected the idea that the story of black heroes is the story of the black race. When he was before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1956 the Chairman challenged his depiction of the prejudice he had faced: "what prejudice are you talking about? You were graduated from Rutgers and you were graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. I remember seeing you play football at Lehigh."<sup>122</sup> The Chairman later clarified the implication of the remark by telling Robeson that "there was no prejudice against you." Robeson replied:

Just a moment. This is something that I challenge very deeply, and very sincerely: that the success of a few Negroes, including myself or Jackie Robinson can make up—and here is a study from Columbia University—for seven hundred dollars a year for thousands of Negro families in the South. My father was a slave, and I have cousins who are sharecroppers, and I do not see my success in terms of myself. That is the reason my

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<sup>122</sup> Testimony of Paul Robeson before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, June 12, 1956: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440>

own success has not meant what it should mean: I have sacrificed literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars for what I believe in.<sup>123</sup>

One man's success, Robeson argued, did not mean that racism had ended. The Chairman's "racism is over" narrative has intensified in various forms in recent years. It is therefore essential, as Robeson suggests, to continue to challenge whiteness where it has existed and continues to exist.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

## EPILOGUE

Near the end of the twentieth century, in the most expensive presentation of *Othello* ever made, witnessed by more people than any *Othello* in history, the most famous and popular critic of his day invoked his idea of a correct Shakespeare to authorize his criticism. In 1995, Roger Ebert wrote of Laurence Fishburne's filmed *Othello* that it "will not give its viewers much of an idea of the Shakespeare play, and may inadvertently give them other ideas, about interracial love, that were not much on Shakespeare's mind."<sup>1</sup> This response raises a couple of questions: How does Roger Ebert know what was going on in Shakespeare's mind? What authority does Ebert have to decide the "idea of the Shakespeare play"? In this study, I have tried to historicize these authorizations of productions by detailing how the creation of "the Shakespearean" functioned as an enforcer of white cultural values. Ebert's comments remind us that Shakespearean correctness is an on-going discourse in American Shakespeare communities.

And one can argue that Ebert's assumptions about the "Shakespeare play" continue to be in service to an ideology of whiteness. By saying that the play is not about race, Ebert makes the play about white-constructed "universal" themes. We see race in America, and by saying that it is not the correct interpretation, he excludes the African American experience from the Shakespearean. Ania Loomba writes that she was taught in India that the play was about a universal love, not about racial difference or, more specifically, about the violence done to women. She writes: "as undergraduates at Miranda House, Delhi...who were dissatisfied with Desdemona's silence in the face of her husband's brutality, we were told that we did not 'understand' her because we had never been 'in love.' *Othello* thus became a sort of universal

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Ebert, "Othello," *The Chicago Sun Times*, December 29, 1995.  
<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19951229/REVIEWS/512290301/1023>

text of love, and love implied female passivity.”<sup>2</sup> The play was not about her experiences, but about a constructed Shakespearean universal that she was not allowed to claim. By assuming Shakespeare’s intents and celebrating a paradoxically exclusive “universality” directors and critics continue to make the play conserve troubling gender and racial values.

This study will hopefully inspire avenues for future research. It would be valuable to trace *Othello* from the 1950s to the present day to track how the civil rights movement and the phenomenon of “color-blind casting” have influenced racial formation in New York and America in general. Joe Papp revolutionized the casting of Shakespearean drama at the Public Theatre through the 1960s and 1970s by placing people of color in “legitimate” roles that had traditionally only been played by whites. This has been a double edged sword, as Ayanna Thompson effectively argues in *Colorblind Shakespeare*. On the one hand, colorblind casting in Shakespeare has given African Americans cultural capital, financial success, and access to a career in the theatre; on the other hand, colorblind casting can “unwittingly” reproduce negative images of blackness, evidenced by one production of an overly sexual black Lady Macbeth that reinforced a “Jezebel” stereotype.<sup>3</sup> This contemporary reality replays the debate by Langston Hughes and the black press during Robeson’s performance: At what cost do black actors gain “legitimacy” on the Shakespearean stage? What images of blackness are intentionally or unintentionally being explored? An examination of these years in the greater context of African American Shakespearean production would be an important addition to understanding how *Othello* arrived at this moment in history.

Perhaps more importantly, this study raises questions about how the American theatre was created through racial understandings in the nineteenth century. Traditionally, many theatre

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<sup>2</sup> Loomba, “Sexuality and Racial Difference,” 163.

<sup>3</sup> Ayanna Thompson, editor, *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10.

historians have segregated African American theatre history from “American” theatre history. In this work, I have used *Othello* as a case study to argue that the “legitimate” American theatre was born through racialized language. From the nineteenth century to today, whiteness has been tied to the definition of successful theatre in this country.

As I was writing this, Tiger Woods was being discovered as a philandering husband. For some who reacted to his sexual promiscuity, this was the moment that Tiger became black. Though the comments cannot be said to be representative, people wrote in to ESPN with shocking language, most of which criticized Elin Nordegren for choosing to be with a black man: “see what happens when you go with dark meat;” “that’s what happens when a white girl gets with a black;” “what a dope! another stupid white girl who thought black guy will stick around;” “That’s what you get for marrying a black man;” “same old scenerio!! They marry a white girl,, treat her like S%&T,, ruin her life! Then cast her aside like a used condom!! Wake up America!!!”<sup>4</sup> In an America still infected by whiteness, African Americans are defined by performances of sexuality, still marginalized for being with white women. Race is still seen to be a performance of behaviors, and we have work to do. The crime papers that associated Othello’s race with his crime and sexuality are unfortunately still instructive.

But today whiteness and racism are not usually this visible. Because of this, theatre artists have a responsibility to pay attention to how race signifies on stage. Too often the onus is placed on the audience. Some artists repeat familiar denials in this so-called post racial age: “if you read racism in *Othello*, then that is your problem. I am beyond race.”<sup>5</sup> Maybe *Othello* should not be performed. Maybe it has to be performed so that these issues are discussed. Perhaps a production of *Othello* can be free of racial implications. It is complicated. Some African

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<sup>4</sup> “Tiger Woods, Wife Divorce,” August 23, 2010. <http://myespn.go.com/s/conversations/show/story/5489950>.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this, see Ayanna Thompson’s introduction to *Colorblind Shakespeare*.

Americans continue to make careers of the role, while others refuse to perform it because it reinforces negative stereotypes. This study is not intended to come to any conclusions about the inherent racism of the play. On the contrary, I have attempted to reveal that both racism and racial progress are built onto the play through language that assumes Shakespearean authority and history. I have tried to show how whites became the property owners of Othello's story, how the whiteness was challenged by African Americans as they claimed his story, and ultimately, how the transfer of that property was incomplete. If there is something that this study does support it is the idea that it is necessary to continue to examine the language we attach to Shakespeare and the assumptions we make about who has the right to claim him as their property. Because whiteness still exists in American Shakespeare. Our project must be to uncover the sources of its power so that it can be challenged.

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